



**THOMAS CARA**

Thomas Care

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## THOMAS CARA



**Thomas Cara tells us of his life in San Francisco's North Beach Italian community as a child and throughout his adult years operating a Cookware and Espresso Machine Shop.**





## **TELEGRAPH HILL DWELLERS' ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**This interview is part of a series undertaken (1993-1996) by the Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Program, University of California, Berkeley. Its focus was oral histories of Italian-Americans from San Francisco's North Beach District.**

**This interview was transcribed and edited by volunteers from the Telegraph Hill Dwellers' Oral History Project.**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Name Thomas Edward Cara  
(First) (Middle) (Last)

Address 451 Lombard Street San Francisco, CA 94133  
(Street) (City) (Zip)

Date of Birth & Death April 22, 1910 - 20001 Place of Birth San Francisco, CA

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date and Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Date and Place of Death \_\_\_\_\_

### GRANDPARENTS:

Father's Parents: Cara

Mother's Parents: Scaglia

### PARENTS:

Father: Umberto Cara Piedmonte, Italy At 72 in San Francisco, CA

Mother: Felichita Scaglia Piedmonte, Italy At 82 in San Francisco, CA

### SIBLINGS:

Brother: Charles Cara 1905, Piedmonte, Italy 1977

Sister: Sue Cara Lesca 1918, San Francisco, CA 1999

SPOUSE: \_\_\_\_\_ Date and Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Date and Place Death \_\_\_\_\_

Mary Antionette Valvano 1922, San Francisco, CA 1987, San Francisco, CA

### CHILDREN:

### GRANDCHILDREN:

John Patrick Cara 1943, Stockton, CA Kathleen and John Patrick, Jr.

Christopher Valvano Cara 1947, San Francisco, CA





**PROJECT:** TELEGRAPH HILL DWELLERS ORAL HISTORY

**NARRATOR:** Thomas Cara

**INTERVIEW DATES:** November 14, 1993 and February 27, 1994

**INTERVIEWER:** Judith Robinson for the Bancroft Library, University of California

**TRANSCRIPT DATES:** 2005 and 2006

**TRANSCRIBER:** Hallie Brignall and Rozell Overmire, Telegraph Hill Dwellers

**[ ]:** Transcriber's Comments

[Thomas Cara was born in North Beach, educated in San Francisco and the Bay Area. By importing espresso machines and cookware, he established a business in North Beach for many years. His son Christopher continues the business today. Born of northern Italian emigrants, Tom recalls his years growing up in the North Beach neighborhood, family winemaking, working in the military in the Counter Intelligence Corps, during World War II, and operating his business.]



Tom Cara --- First Interview, November 14, 1993

Interviewed by Judith Robinson, at her home in North Beach, San Francisco.

JUDITH ROBINSON: Well, let's just start in and Tom, tell us when you were born.

THOMAS CARA: Well, I was born here on the west slope of Telegraph Hill and that was near where the old church was. Now the old church was on DuPont and Filbert. And the priest lived on the side of the premises. And the entrance for the priest's house was on Filbert Street. And the entrance to the church was on DuPont, right on the corner of DuPont and Filbert.

JUDY: DuPont being called Grant Avenue now?

TOM: Grant Avenue now, yeah. In those days it was DuPont.

JUDY: Now when were you born?

TOM: I was born 1910.

JUDY: What day?

TOM: April the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1910.

JUDY: Were you born at home Tom or at a hospital?



TOM: [Laugh] Well, home was a hospital in those days. [Laugh] Yeah, born right in the house there. Born on Filbert Street there. The doctors came to the house on the corner there on Filbert Street. Right near the corner of Grant Avenue, DuPont.

JUDY: Now, tell me about your parents? Your father was first generation?

TOM: [Laugh] He was from the Alps.

JUDY: And his name? Now tell me about his name because it was Irish. Was it spelled C-A-R-E-A?

TOM: Carea? [Laugh] No. C-A-R-A. Same way, yeah, the way you hear my father talk about it. He figured that the name was Irish. I asked him how in the hell could it be Irish? "Well," he says, "In the war of 1804...." I'm pretty sure that's what it was. Wasn't 1854. See, there was some trouble up in the northern part of Italy there in the Alps. The trouble was between Francis the First of France and Philip the Fourth of Spain. Francis the First didn't trust his own Frenchmen, so he had a regiment of Irishmen. That's where my father sprang from. Then they lost. Francis the First had to do something so he went in with Philip the Fourth in Spain to save his own skin. And so the Irish that were hired by Francis the First lost and that's where a lot of the Irish were down in the valley. That's where the Irish come in on the act. And my father looked it over and investigated and found that the name originated with an Irishman. And because later on even in my lifetime we were getting letters from Ireland, saying that the name is not Italian, that it's Irish. So my father accepted it.



JUDY: So they somehow stayed around in the valley?

TOM: Yes and they stayed around in the valley. That's it.

JUDY: And here you are today? What schools did you go to, Tom?

TOM: I went to Washington Grammar which was up here on Washington and Mason Streets. The old Washington Grammar. Up to the eighth grade and so I went to school there from the 1st to the 7th grade. Washington Grammar was up where the Car Barn is [Cable Car Barn, storage and mechanism for the cable cars].

JUDY: So you walked up there?

TOM: Yeah. Well, you know, I walked up there from...you know when I was a youth. I lived over here on Filbert Street.

JUDY: Well, that is quite a little hike up there.

TOM: Yeah, it was. But that is where I wanted to go to school. And that is where my mother says, "Well, Ok, then you'll go there." Prior to that the only schooling I had was the Day Home where I'd go there. They'd make sure you would get ABCDEFG whatever it is and whatnot. And so, I wanted to go to school up there because my brother went to school up there.

JUDY: Oh. OK. Now was that a mixture of...?

TOM: That was a mixture of Italians and French.

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JUDY: No Chinese or Asians in those days?

TOM: I wouldn't want to put that in there because they weren't around there in those days up there, see.

JUDY: No. No. Of course, now it is part of Chinatown.

TOM: No, it wasn't part of Chinatown then. Afterwards, they had their own Chinese school down two blocks away from it. Whatever the name of the school is over there... It is still there now. See, in those days, that is where there were French and Italian and a few Spanish. Very few Spanish... there were a few Spanish people living up near the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. On Broadway, see. So, that was the first Spanish parish church. So, there were a few Spaniards in there but they were outnumbered by the French and Italians in Washington Grammar

JUDY: Right. So, then where did you go to High School?

TOM: Then my mother took me out and sent me out to Ellis and Franklin, Sacred Heart. That was a Catholic school and it had grammar grades, in those days, besides the high school. You got on a streetcar for a nickel and if you bought the street car tickets at two and a half cents. So there was no trouble about getting to school on the street car. It was so damn cheap. It was no trouble at all. And after I graduated from there I went to St. Mary's College in Moraga.

JUDY: Is that right? You graduated from Sacred Heart and went to Moraga.



TOM: And how it happened, that when I went to St.Mary's...after I graduated. This is during the depression, huh. In '29. So, I went over and asked to enlist in Saint Mary's. And I talked to them over there. And they asked: "Well, where did you go to school?" And I told them Sacred Heart. "You went from the grammar school?" I said, "Yep, from the grammar school." "And afterwards, you went through the High School there?" "Yep." "And, you know the tuition, what it is going to be?" "Yeah, but..." "You got the money?" "Well, I don't know, but my folks might have a little money." He says, "Well, let me know how much you can pay." "Well, right, when I come back again." So, when I went back the second time, he says, "OK. Can you get \$250 for every six months?" I said, "Well, I'll ask my mother." So, I got back to him and I says, "Yeah, my mother will go for \$250 for every six months." Can you imagine!

JUDY: And one of the priests thought you were Irish.

TOM: Yeah. [Laughter] He says, "Come on you got to be kidding, you got an Irish name. Cara is Irish." "Well, I don't know where it came from, but my folks came out of Italy."

JUDY: When did you graduate from college?

TOM: In 33'. 1933. Yeah.

JUDY: What was your field of study?



TOM: Business administration. Years later, when I went to a homecoming day over at St. Mary's, I met Brother Ralph. He was the head of the college over at St. Mary's and we were there talking. And I says I was from North Beach and he says "How can you be from North Beach? You're Irish." "Oh," I says, "Well, there were Irish around in North Beach those days too. We have St. Francis Church which is for the Irish." And he says, "Boy that's sure something. Well, I always took you for an Irishman. You got blue eyes and everything." "Oh yeah?" He says, "That's why I gave you a good entrance into St. Mary's College and a good job." [Laugh] Can you imagine that? And that was the truth. He gave me a good job and I didn't have to fork over an awful lot of money. My folks took care of that, you know. And then Brother Ralph says, "Why I helped you through school? Because I thought you were an Irishmen! The name is Cara and that's Irish." I said, "Well, I don't know, but it comes back a long, long way." And that was a funny thing. It sure helped me out there.

JUDY: So you worked your way partially through college?

TOM: Oh, yes. He gave me a good job over there after school working in the garden. I knew how to work in a garden, you know, and I planted a lot of those trees over in Moraga up in the hills.

JUDY: No kidding. So you lived over there? You didn't commute?

TOM: I lived over there. Yes, I didn't have to commute.



JUDY: 'Cause the only thing that they had out there was ferries and trains.

TOM: Oh yeah, in those days, there was a train coming in that'd take you hours. And then you get on the boat to come over. Yeah, so that was very, very ...the good great Brother Ralph.

JUDY: Brother Ralph, I take it, was of the Irish persuasion?

TOM: Yeah, he was from the Irish side.

JUDY: Well, you got the best of all possible worlds, Tom.

TOM: Yeah. [Laugh]

JUDY: Irish, Italian. Well, also, you had a wonderful facility for languages because you said your father spoke...

TOM: He spoke French and Italian and Spanish. Yeah, oh yeah, he knew well Spanish.

JUDY: Why would he have known [Spanish]?





TOM: Well, I don't know. I think he studied it in Italy. He studied Spanish in Italy. He was very, very attached to Spaniards and he did the hiring for a construction firm and he was very biased to the Spanish. He says they were good workers.

JUDY: And he then worked on the great [Simplon] Tunnel [through the Alps]?

TOM: Yeah, he worked on the Tunnel. Yes.

JUDY: So then, he came over here in what year?

TOM: He came to Santa Barbara from Italy before the earthquake and fire.

JUDY: Before '06?

TOM: Yeah, before '06 earthquake and fire. He was already married though. He came over as a single man and then when the earthquake and fire struck, well, he realized that there was a lot of work up here. So that's when he came north, see?

JUDY: Right.

TOM: And he knew how to speak a little Spanish so he got along with the people that were from Mexico that were watching or looking for a job up here because of the earthquake and fire. And he got along very well. And then he knew construction



because he grew up in Switzerland on construction work. They had to just cross the border to get to Switzerland from their hometown, see, so they were very close to Switzerland.

JUDY: So you guys were on the Italian corner of Switzerland then?

TOM: Right on the side of Sampiun.

JUDY: Say that again.

TOM: Dialect. S-A-M-P-I-U-N. Sampiun. Yeah.

JUDY: So he spoke dialect and you spoke that in the home. And your mother too?

TOM: He met her in Italy. He got married in Italy. She only lived a couple of blocks away from him in the Piedmont region.

JUDY: Oh, I see. Now Mary, [Cara's wife] Mary is Genovese?

TOM: Yeah, Mary was a Genovese.

JUDY: So you spoke Piedmontese and English in the home as you grew up then?



TOM: Yes. Papa knew French too. So you see he got along fine over here after the earthquake and fire. He knew how to speak the languages and so he got along fine. [Laugh] And then, inasmuch as he did construction work in southern Switzerland and Italy... [Laugh]. That's what my father always said, "The Swiss knew how to make watches but they couldn't build a house." So they depended on the people on the other side of the border.

JUDY: The Italians?

TOM: Yeah, the Italians, those that grew up in construction work like my father. That's why when he came here after the earthquake and fire he had no trouble getting a job. 'Cause he already knew how to read plans. So that helped him out quite a bit. And in a short time he was already a foreman, you know, a construction foreman. So he contributed an awful lot to building San Francisco after the earthquake and fire. And my mother, she already married him in Italy. And my brother was born in Italy. He grew up to be a first-grade banker. My brother, Charlie, was with the Italian American Bank, in those days.

JUDY: Now known as the Bank of America.

TOM: Yeah, now it's all Bank of America. But in those days it was Italian American Bank down on Clay and Montgomery. That building is still there. He died, you know, he died young.



JUDY: You have a sister...

TOM: Sue, that's my sister.

JUDY: Sue! And, any other siblings?

TOM: I had a brother that was born, how do you say? Death birth? Born dead. Yeah. And he was born on Grant Avenue and that's when my folks lived on Grant Avenue and Filbert.

JUDY: After you were born?

TOM: Yeah, after I was born. He was born after I was born.

JUDY: Charlie was your older brother?

TOM: Charlie was the older brother. Sue was born after the stillborn. She's the youngest.

JUDY: Now tell us something about growing up in North Beach. I'd love to hear those stories. I guess you went to church regularly. What was that church you went to?





TOM: The old church, Sts. Peter and Paul.

JUDY: Oh, the original Sts. Peter and Paul?

TOM: Yeah, it was on DuPont and Filbert.

JUDY: And that, of course, burned in the earthquake and fire.

TOM: Yeah. [Note: The old church was rebuilt after the fire and earthquake and used for services until the 1924 when the new church was completed on Filbert facing Washington Square.]

JUDY: So that was in '06 and you were born in 1910 after the fire.

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: You once told me, Tom, that you remembered hauling grapes up to some of the houses around here?

TOM: Yeah. There was a time when each family was allowed to make 250 gallons of wine, see.

JUDY: Oh, for their own consumption?



TOM: Yeah, only for consumption. Yeah, family wine could be only 250 gallons, you see? And that's when the people would go down to get the grapes. They would come from up in Sonoma. The freight trains were down near the corner of Broadway and Sansome. That's where the grape freight cars came in.

You'd go down and you'd have to buy the grapes for your own wine, see? Well, I remember going down with my father and seeing how they did it. We'd go around from one freight car to another freight car and touch and smell the grapes. Then take a bite from one. "No, I don't like it". And then go up to the next freight car. "Yeah, good!" And so then they would go out and holler, "Gotta one, gotta one, gotta one, gotta one!" [Laugh] So they'd get the horse and wagon and come over and bring a ton of grapes up to the house, see?

My father had his own property down here. That's why, when you have an empty flat you'd show the person [renter], "Look you don't have to go out and haul the grinder and the torch. In here you got a torch and here you got a grinder. So all you have to do is go down to Front Street and buy your grapes and somebody will be around to give you a hand," or they'd be two men on the horse and wagon.

And in those days, it was wonderful when you'd see a load of grapes coming up. If there wasn't anybody in the back standing guard for the grapes, kids would come up and rob the grapes for eating! [Laugh] I always remember that. Later on in years when



my father said, "You stand back there! And if someone comes up and wants to rob some grapes..." Yeah, he'd give me a long stick. "And just hit around with the stick and that's it!" And that's the way they brought the grapes home.

JUDY: Literally a ton? Everybody bought it by the ton?

TOM: A ton of grapes. You bought it by the ton in those days, yeah. There were so many pounds to a box. There were maybe 20 boxes of grapes, you see. And that's when my father-- when he bought the property down here at the next block. Where are we? Oh, across the street.

JUDY: We're at Lombard and Powell.

TOM: Yeah, we're across the street. I was still thinking I was up at... [his later residence on Lombard below Grant].

JUDY: So, then he bought this house over here on Lombard?

TOM: Yeah. Oh, he paid an awful price for that. \$7,000!

JUDY: That's high! When was that?



TOM: [Laugh] Nineteen... Oh Jesus, you know, there were nine flats. Seven--no, seven flats.

JUDY: That's in the 500 block of Lombard buildings. The one across the street here?

TOM: Yeah, yeah. That's seven flats and it was seven flats in those days. There was no garage in there.

JUDY: \$1,000 dollars a flat?

TOM: Uh, Jesus, yeah.

JUDY: What year about was that?

TOM: That was in about 1920.

JUDY: So you were about 10?

TOM: Yeah, yeah, I was about ten years old. 1920--and so when they had that property, he went out and bought a puncheon and bought a grinder, a grape grinder and a torch. [Another North Beach Italian, Norma Tealdi, described the "torch" as follows: "It is a big container all made of wood -- redwood. And it has got all iron around it. And you put the grapes in there. It was a round thing and the grapes would be all in there





fermenting.”] So that way when he had an empty flat, they [tenants] came to my father. In those days, then, you had to get somebody to help you to pull the damn things, especially around here with all these hills. Pull the damn thing—torch, especially the torch. The grinder you can handle. Two people can break it down. But a torch was heavy. So you'd see a lot of pulling up the damn torch, coming up somebody's hill. It took three or four fellows to pull up the torch. And so when they came in there, he'd never have an empty flat because he'd show 'em here, "Here's your torch and here's your puncher." No, puncheon.

JUDY: P-U-N-C-H-E-O-N?

TOM: Yeah, puncheon. After they grind the grapes, they put it in there and ferment it. They ferment it in a puncheon. What the hell is it in American?

JUDY: Well, a puncheon, I think is the word. But it would be a fermenting vat.

TOM: Yeah, the vats. The big vats, the fermenting vats.

JUDY: So if anybody lived there, it [the equipment] was all ready to make their wine?

TOM: Yeah, see, so they didn't have to go out and pull in any grapes. That's the way he would rent a flat. "You don't have to go out and do it like these others." And he said he never had an empty flat. [Laugh]



JUDY: Isn't that wonderful? So you remember the horse and wagon then, coming up from Sansome or along Washington Square or along Powell?

TOM: Mmm They came up.

JUDY: And turn left up here, and came up in front of your house?

TOM: Some of them, if they didn't have too big of a load, would come around like that. They couldn't exactly take Broadway because it was a little too heavy there. So they'd just come around the waterfront.

JUDY: I see. Down Sansome and then around up Powell.

TOM: Up Powell there.

JUDY: And of course then your garage wasn't there. So you had what? A big yard there in front?

TOM: There was. [a yard]

JUDY: The wagon would pull in with these two horses.



TOM: Yeah, pull in and they'd come up there. And then, they'd take the boxes and bring 'em up on up, see? And somebody from there would always give em' a hand bringing up boxes.

JUDY: Now, did that go into the basement of the house where you did your grape work? You pointed out one time up there some hooks and you said, "Well that's where they would haul grapes up."

TOM: Well, that was up there [the other house]. But down here, they would bring the grapes up by a staircase there. It was a big empty lot in front of the house there, see? And then my father's the one that had it excavated. Oh, he had an awful time with the neighbors around here. Why? Well, you know, in those days, to clear it, they'd dig down and then dynamite it. And ohhh! The neighbors would complain. Shake the whole damn side of the hill there. *Boom!* And that's the only way they can break the rocks. Cause' it was all solid rock. And so that's the way it was done and that's the way he got it cleared out so he can have a garage there. Yeah, he foresaw the coming of cars. So he said, "We need a garage, too, you know, if you want to rent the place."  
[Laugh]

JUDY: Good for him. Do you remember those dynamitings?

TOM: Yeah, sure I do. Oh God, it would shake up. Yeah. Shake the hell out of you.



There was all these solid rocks and then, *Boom!!! Boom, boom, boom!* More people complained, the police department came and everything. What are you going to do?

JUDY: Yeah, but you didn't have any San Francisco planning department to worry about. [Laugh] You just went right in and 'boom' dynamited your front yard.

TOM: No, he had—they had permits and everything, but that wasn't against the law! Because they had a lot of dynamiting all the way up the hill here, you know? And in those days my father had a piece of property. You know when you go up Lombard and you make a turn to go on the hill there? You know where the road is? And it goes up to Coit Tower? All right, well, he had a piece of property, the very last piece of property where Lombard came up and made a turn to go on that hill there. When they built the hill there like that, that's when the right of eminent domain... That's when he lost that property there.

JUDY: When did they build Coit Tower and put the road in? [1933]

TOM: Yeah, and they put the road in. And that's where he wanted to live, on a hill just like where he was born in the Alps and, by God Almighty, I remember him beefing like hell. The right of eminent domain—he lost a property. I think he got \$500 for it, but he paid \$200 maybe --- five to seven or ten to fifteen years prior to that, see, so he still made \$300 in those days on that. But he wanted to build there and that's why he





bought the property there. But then it went into the right of eminent domain and they took the property away from him.

JUDY: And he dreamed of his house on that hill.

TOM: Yes, that's right, yes. [Laugh]

JUDY: What a terrible blow. Old Lily Hitchcock Coit left money and your dad lost the property.

TOM: Yeah. [Laugh] Because he wanted the view of Alcatraz and everything, you know. Right of eminent domain, they took it away from him. And that's where they put the road in there.

JUDY: But you remember that wine making, don't you?

TOM: Yes, oh sure.

JUDY: Well, tell us a little bit about that cause' a lot of us don't know much about that. You brought the grapes in. You went down to your basement and then you...?

TOM: Yes, down the basement and then you had a puncheon, huh? And you could go out and rent the grinder to grind the grapes. In those days, whoever had one of those



would put a lock on it. A lock and chain and put it in front of the house, see? So that way you could see it and then come back. He'd put a little sign on there [to say] what flat it was [where] the owner lived, you know? And then you would rent it. And it was up to them to have it moved. You didn't move it for 'em. They had to move it. And that's why my father always sold or always rented his property. He built the back house there. On the back of the house like a second basement, see? And that's where he had the torch and the press in there, see? So we'd show 'em that and by God, they would rent the damn property.

JUDY: I take it invariably they were Italian?

TOM: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

JUDY: So you ground the grapes. And this all occurred in the fall after the harvest?

TOM: Oh yeah! My father would go around, taste a grape. "It's not that good!!!" So, he'd bargain with them.

JUDY: Would this all go down largely in Italian or English?

TOM: No, in Italian. Mostly all in Italian. Yeah, yeah. [Laugh] And so then he'd buy it. Well then, as a kid, I'd have to get in the back of the horse and wagon. Otherwise,



when it's coming up, the other kids around the neighborhood would rob all the goddamned grapes!

JUDY: It was a game?

TOM: Yeah. Well no, it wasn't a game. But you know, what the hell, if there's nobody protecting the grapes they'd take nice bunches of grapes and gee, they're beautiful you know? Beautiful grapes! [They would] take bunches of grapes or pass it to somebody else down below that's working with 'em. Not to sell it but just for their own. There were a lot of other kids and that was it. And another one would stay in the back with a long broom, "Hey-- heyyyyy! Aaaahhh, get out, get out!" And the horse and wagon would come on up Columbus Avenue across Broadway. [Laugh]

JUDY: So at that time there must have been a lot of those wagons coming and going up [to] North Beach?

TOM: Oh yes, there was. That was the way to bring them home.

JUDY: And what kind of wine did he make? Red and white?

TOM: No, mostly all red. Mostly all red because it was very simple to make as compared to white, see? Very simple. White you have to keep it clear [from] this and that, you know. Yeah, mostly red wine.



JUDY: Was it pretty good as you remember?

TOM: Oh yeah, the grapes are all ripe.

JUDY: So you'd grind the grapes and...

TOM: They'd grind the grapes and then put it in the puncheon and let it ferment.

JUDY: How long?

TOM: Oh, about six, seven, eight, nine days. It all depends on how much sugar was in the grapes. And my father would come out and test it, you know, "No, it's not ready yet." Then put [it] down into the press and then press it. Six or seven days like that, you know, yeah. The time it would take to ferment, to be regular, to be pressed down. And then what they would do would [be to] draw off the syrup of the wine and put that in one barrel and take out the fermented grapes and put that in the press. The torch, we used to call it the torch in those days.

JUDY: I wondered what you meant by torch. The torch is the press?

TOM: The press, yeah. The torch was the press. You put it in the torch, press it down and then it goes in the barrel. And then it would have finished its fermentation in there.





You wouldn't put the cover on because it'd blow it off, see? So you'd let it ferment a little in there. Right there and then after three or five, six days then put the cork back on, see? And then they'd taste it every once in awhile. They'd go down and siphon out some wine and then put it in a glass and [sniffing noise], "It's ready now, okay, so lets put it in barrels." [Laugh]

JUDY: Boy! So they put it in smaller barrels?

TOM: Yeah, then—well, you see--no. In other words, they were doing a tasting when it was in fermentation in the big puncheon.

JUDY: In the vat? The puncheon?

TOM: Yeah, in the puncheon. Put it in. Take out the wine first and then take out the pomace.

JUDY: Yeah, the grapes, okay.

TOM: The grapes—the pomace-- after it's fermented, it's pomace. Take it out and put that in the torch and squeeze the shit out of it. [Laugh] Excuse my English.

JUDY: [Laugh] And then, what did you do with the juice from that? You put that back in with the syrup?



TOM: That goes. That goes. No! No, when you squeeze that out, that was wine practically because it already fermented. So, they'd put that right in the barrel and leave it in the barrel for about eight, nine days. They'd taste it to make sure that it didn't ferment anymore. There was no more life to the wine you see? So then they put the cork on, otherwise it blows the cork to hell.

JUDY: Did you ever have that happen?

TOM: No, it's happened though. My father was a good wine maker so it never happened. But you heard from other people, "Oh, the cork blew over! Your father didn't wait long enough. He put the damn cork on too soon!" You know, the big puncheon cork?

JUDY: So then they'd lose their whole....?

TOM: No, they wouldn't lose it. It just goes off. They don't lose anything. In other words, it's just the pressure that would work, that brought up, that's all. They wouldn't lose anything. It was just a reaction of the fermentation.

JUDY: I see. So then they just let it go?

TOM: Yeah, that's it. Yeah.



JUDY: What did they do with the syrup? I didn't quite understand. You said they draw the syrup off?

TOM: Not syrup.

JUDY: You said they drew the syrup off and put it in one barrel and then you put the fermented grapes into the press--the torch. Well, never mind, it's not...

TOM: Well, wait awhile now, we're going in [to] the wine, in other words, not into the cultivation. I'll give it to you so you know. All right, after you pressed your wine—I mean your grapes...you put it in a puncheon. The big puncheon and there it stays six or seven days and that's when you go tasting it. Is it ready? Has it got any indication that it is a good wine or that it is ready to be pressed, you see? And so then, that's where they draw off the wine because it's been in there six or seven days. Draw off the wine and then...I forget the technical terms of wine making now. It's been so long since I worked on it. And then you'd take out the pomace that still had wine with it. The pomace...and you'd put that in the torch. And then that's where they would squeeze the shit out of it. Excuse me. [Laugh]

JUDY: And there came out all the lovely juices.



TOM: And then that came out, which was wine. And that would go in the barrel, period! And then they'd let it sit seven or eight days before they put the cork down deep on it. Otherwise, if it's still fermenting a little, it blew the damn cork off. And your damn wine you might lose it. So that's what it was. It was wine-making. A wine-making knowledge, period.

JUDY: But it went on all over North Beach?

TOM: Yeah!

JUDY: Every household—many households made wine?

TOM: Well, many of them. Yes, oh yes. A lot of them, you know? Because you know we had prohibition, too.

JUDY: Ohhhh, right!

TOM: You couldn't sell wine, you know.

JUDY: In the '20s and '30s [1920-33].

TOM: Yeah, during prohibition and that's when we had the bootleggers working out--- not selling whiskey but just selling wine, see? That's what we refer to as the





bootleggers. The bootleggers sold the wine on the side, and that's why every once in awhile they got caught by the federal people.

JUDY: Do you remember any of those incidences?

TOM: Huh? You make me feel like I'm nineteen years old. [Laugh]

JUDY: Well, you are Tom. Do you miss that? Do you wish you made your wine?

TOM: Oh. It was too much trouble. Oh, for Christ's sakes.

JUDY: Better to let somebody else do it. My dad remembers making whiskey in a bathtub when he was in medical school.

TOM: No, we didn't know anything about whiskey here because we were mostly all Northern Italians. And another thing when it comes to Northern Italians around North Beach, I always remembered when I was a kid we lived up in Varennes. That's a little alley over here, Varennes.

JUDY: You lived on Varennes too?



TOM: Yeah, we lived on Varennes too. And the rest of the people living in that whole alley were Genovese, see? And they referred to my father as the frog. [Laugh] See, because he was Piedmontese.

JUDY: French to them.

TOM: Yeah, and being Piedmontese was a frog. French frog. And oh, he always had trouble with that. "Oh yeah, the frog lives up [there]." And they were old Genovese because the whole district was Genovese with the exception of Kearny Street. Kearny Street between Union and Vallejo, when you went there you thought you were in Calabria. The Calabrese lived in those two blocks. And by God, you didn't understand what the hell they were saying! They would speak in a foreign language. [Laugh] If they spoke in Italian, good night!

And there's still a couple of [Genovese] families left up there. In fact, the one [whose] father had the grocery store right on the corner of the alley. What in the hell is his name now? He's still alive and my age and his father had a grocery store right on the corner. It was the only community store. Right on the corner there of....

JUDY: Oh, Varennes. Where that sewing shop now is? Where Alma's Sewing [is?]

TOM: Yeah, yeah! I think there's a sewing shop on the corner. Yeah, yeah, Alma. You're right now. I think it's right there.



JUDY: It's on Union and Varennes. That was a grocery store?

TOM: In those days, Fidichiero.

JUDY: Fidichiero. How do you spell it?

TOM: F-I-D-I-C-H-I-E-R-O. Fidichiero. Yeah, they're still alive here. In fact, I saw one of 'em just the other day going to church down here. The family is still alive. And they had the grocery store there. In those days, a grocery store was a real grocery store [where] you buy everything there. They had the building down at the corner, the Fidichieros, an old Genovese family. Around here, if you weren't Genovese, "What the hell is he? What the hell is a Piedmontese?" [Laugh]

JUDY: Did you get in fights because of this?

TOM: Well now, they wouldn't fight but there'd be an awful lot of, "Oh, Genovese, tight-ass." They would call them, tight-ass.

JUDY: Were they known to be tight with the money?



TOM: Yeah, very tight-ass with the money. Not free with it you know. And they ran the scavenger company, you see? So they [Laugh] they were head of the A list. Yeah, the Genovese had control of the scavengers [Garbage Company].

JUDY: Okay. And they're the ones who still run the scavenger company?

TOM: Yes, they still do! Thank god, for crissakes! I'm glad that people voted against City Hall. They'd get a bunch of politicians in there and that's it. Boy, I'm glad they won that. Boy, there must have been a lot of old family votes around here. Jesus Christ!

JUDY: You can be sure of that. Sunset Scavenger.

TOM: Jesus, you can imagine! Christ, they'd take the damn thing away from you. Good night, get out in the City Hall and there you are. You don't know who the hell is who. Who's on first?

JUDY: So you don't remember having fights in the street because you were a Piedmontese?

TOM: No, no fights in the street. But, I could tell you about the Genovese, where they worked, where they lived. They were an accepted people of Italy. There were an awful lot of em', because why? The Genovese didn't come from the industrialized section of Italy. Consequently, when they came over here they didn't have the





knowledge of construction like the Piedmontese did, see? The Genovese here were grateful but of course they were the money people because they knew how to handle money and that was part of their prodigy. A. P. Giannini and all the rest of the bank are all Genovese. Oh yes, sure. Their family go back years and years, but they were Genovese. They knew the value of a dollar and they knew how to handle money, the Genovese. And they were the majority here in San Francisco and North Beach. Why? They knew how to get into big business. They were very fruitful.

JUDY: Was that a traditional Italian thing, that the Genovese were known to be the business people and the money handlers?

TOM: No, no, financial.

JUDY: The financial people.

TOM: Yes. It was an inheritance. If you were Genovese: "Hey, how much money you got in your pocket there?" [Laugh] They knew! They knew how to handle money, period!

JUDY: They were the bankers of Italy.

TOM: Yeah, and the Piedmontese were the builders. They knew everything about construction. But it seems like it comes back from the old days, you see? Back in



Europe, the Piedmontese would be taken into Switzerland to build. They knew--they knew how to read plans, period.

JUDY: Architects.

TOM: Architects and what not, you see. And those were the Piedmontese. And the Genovese were all financial people. And over here was the same tradition, builders and financial people. Yeah.

JUDY: Well, you had friends then in all levels of Italian heritage?

TOM: Yeah, yeah. All right, then we take the Sicilians. After the earthquake and fire A. P. Giannini's father-in-law Cuneo, he built the flats. That was Genovese. Now the flats were what we have comparable now to the progress... What do we call those? Progressive? What do we call them?

JUDY: Oh, public housing?

TOM: Yeah, public housing. That's it.

JUDY: Projects.



TOM: Yeah, projects! There you got it now! A. P. Giannini's brother in-law Cuneo built the flats which was a birthrate [sic "precursor or birthplace"] of the projects. After the earthquake and fire, where in the hell were the poor [Sicilian] fishermen going to go and live?

JUDY: Right.

TOM: And so that is why he built the projects down there right at Jones between...it's between Columbus, Leavenworth and Bay, comin' down that triangle. That was the Cuneo flats and that's where the poor Sicilians were able to get...

JUDY: Low-cost housing.

TOM: Low-cost housing, period. Okay, gee, you're wonderful.

JUDY: [Laugh] Yes, but that was the idea. But it wasn't public money? It was private?

TOM: No, private money.

JUDY: But, to make it affordable.

TOM: Make affordable for the poor Sicilians. The Sicilians just had to work. Walk a block and a half to get on a boat to go out and catch fish. You know, in those days, we







Cuneo Flats



didn't have the Fisherman's Wharf as we have it now. It wasn't a tourist attraction. It was a matter of making a buck so you could go home and eat.

JUDY: So the Sicilians were mostly the fishermen then?

TOM: They were the fishermen in those days, yes.

JUDY: What is Joe DiMaggio's heritage? Was he a Sicilian?

TOM: Yeah, he's Sicilian and he was born up on this side. He was born down on Vallejo here. Yeah, he was born in the beach—in the beach. [Editor: He was born in Martinez, California, in 1914 and his family moved to San Francisco and they lived at 2047 Taylor Street.]

JUDY: And did he actually play, as we are told, down here at the North Beach playground?

TOM: Yeah! Yeah! Sure! That's where he learned baseball down here at the North Beach playground. [It is now named the Joe DiMaggio Playground.]

JUDY: Well, that's been there since you lived over here on Lombard.

TOM: Yes! Yes. Yes. Yes. That was before I was born. That was down there already.



JUDY: That was a baseball diamond?

TOM: Yeah, well, you could go play baseball and that's where he learned baseball there. Yeah.

JUDY: Did you ever see him playing in those days?

TOM: Well, yeah. We did, you know.

JUDY: As a kid?

TOM: As a kid, sure. The trouble was, he was accepted because he was a beautiful baseball player.

JUDY: I understand what you're saying.

TOM: He was accepted because he was a big beautiful baseball player. He knew how to play baseball, period. But the poor Sicilians, they were extroverted [i.e., excommunicated] down to the Fisherman's Wharf. "Your business? Fish business! You stay down there and we'll take care of our own business up here!"

JUDY: So nobody liked the Sicilians?



TOM: Well, not that they disliked them, but there wasn't any welcome. Not the welcome that the others had, until Joe DiMaggio came, and changed the whole picture. Joe DiMaggio was the one who changed the whole picture of being acceptable for Sicilians. In other words, when you talk about fishermen... "Ah, he's a fisherman! He's a Sicilian." See?

JUDY: Smelly old fishermen.

TOM: Yeah, and that was what they had because they didn't come over with any experience from over in Europe. They didn't run any banks or nothin' like the Genovese ran. But the Sicilians were very hospitable and very, very, very, very acceptable in house prestige. [very welcoming] My godmother was a Piedmontese that married a Sicilian. And they lived a half a block from the Cannery. She was a wonderful woman, wonderful woman.

JUDY: You remember her well then?

TOM: Yes, I do. Oh God, yeah.

JUDY: You must have had a lot of active fun with family and friends.



TOM: Oh yes! Oh yes! My father used to love to go down to that Sicilian family and sing songs, Italian songs, you know. And oh God, he loved it. Yes.

JUDY: So that was a happy melding of cultures.

TOM: Oh, it was. And that kind of outstretched [over] all North Beach, you see? That the first thing you know, it wasn't the Genovese and all the money going on there. Other people start putting their money into the envelopes period.

JUDY: So all that kind of blended?

TOM: It blended in. It blended in.

JUDY: Like you and Mary.

TOM: Yeah, well, the thing that blended in was the church. The church is the one that unified the whole district. It was the church.

JUDY: Cause' you were all Italians and Catholics together...

TOM: All together, yes. And the church unified the whole district. In other words, made people accustomed to other people's habits. And it was the Catholic Church that did that. That big building, you see? When we were children we went to school [and





then] we went to church up here on Grant Avenue, [formerly] DuPont. And then we would go downstairs and that's where they'd give us the catechism class. You don't bat with the right do you?

JUDY: [Laugh] Tell me what that means again. Meaning I'm not a Catholic?

TOM: Yeah. [Laugh].

JUDY: Why do you say that? [Laugh]

TOM: That means if you bat with the right, you were a Catholic. When you went out to somebody and you're gonna' meet somebody, maybe in politics, and if you said, "He bats with the right." Boy, okay, then he's a Catholic. Otherwise he's a left-hander.

JUDY: Maybe he's a Protestant?

TOM: He's a Protestant. [Laugh]

JUDY: [Laugh] I never. Why bat with the right?

TOM: I tell you he bats with the right, he's a Catholic. If the guy said, "Yeah." Well then you didn't have to say no. But if the guy says no, "You mean to say he's a left-hander?" "Yeah." "Okay." Then you temporise your discussion. [Laugh] And that was



a way of finding out, you know, [If] he was a Catholic. Then you can come out and say, "Ah you son of bitch, what the hell you talkin' about?"

JUDY: Oh, I see.

TOM: But then if he was a left-hander, then you're very careful with your conversation. Careful, you know, see. [Laugh]

JUDY: Oh, isn't that funny.

TOM: You makin' me feel like I'm fifteen years old. [Laugh]

JUDY: Oh, isn't it fun? Oh, that is so funny, Tom.

TOM: [Laugh] Yeah.

JUDY: 'Bat with the right.' And then, your wife Mary was Genovese? So you you're a good example of the unified [Italians].

TOM: Her great grandfather came around the Horn. That's when they came here--- around the Horn. So you can imagine.

JUDY: Oh, my gosh! That gives me goose bumps.



TOM: But when Mary's folks came, the grandparents, that was during 1855. They came here in 1855. There wasn't anything doing here, but everything was being done up in the mountains.

JUDY: Gold Rush.

TOM: The Gold Rush, yeah, 1855, see? That's when they came here, in 1855.

JUDY: From Italy?

TOM: From Italy, yeah. But my father used to always say, "Those Genovese, all they had to [do] was walk a half a block to get on a boat to get over here. We had to come from the Alps. And by God, it took us as much money to come from the Alps [to Genova] as it did to go from Genova to New York. That's why you have all the Genovese here because it was easy for them to come over here.

JUDY: Went down to the harbor. Oh God. Well, so her family then came here and had a business and...?

TOM: No, they went right up to the mine.

JUDY: Went to the Gold Rush. Ohhh!!



TOM: The Gold Rush, yeah, '55. And then from there they moved down closer to Stockton and that's where they established, in Stockton.

JUDY: With their Gold Rush spoils and established some businesses?

TOM: That's it, yes.

JUDY: And where did you meet her? Here in the City or in Stockton?

TOM: I met her in Stockton because I used to sell for her father. [Christopher Cara, Tom's son, recalls that his Stockton grandfather had liquor stores during the war and that his dad was a wine merchant for Petri Wine.]

JUDY: Well, how did you come to be selling for her father? I don't understand. You had gone into business yourself with a...

TOM: Yeah, I went into business myself.

JUDY: When did you do that? After the war...?





TOM: In '46. After the war, yeah. Then I had a lot of contacts in the war. No trouble at all because during the war I met a lot of people that were in manufacturing. During the war I was in with U.S. business deals and what not.

JUDY: So you met Mary after the war?

TOM: You know, I met Mary during the war. [He met her while he was selling wine before he enlisted, says Christopher Cara.] And I married [her]. And I went out to the Presidio and I enlisted in the Army out at the Presidio. Eh. After I enlisted, because of my lingo, [Tom spoke French, Spanish, and Italian. Also, he learned various Italian regional dialects from his North Beach playmates.], right away, [they said] "We can't use you here. You have got to go back to O.C.S." I said, "I don't want to go to O.C.S. I have a family here." "Well, they said, you have to go back east to Officer's Training School, O.C.S." I said, "O.K." So that is when I had to go to O.C.S. And then when I got there, I was the only one that knew all about Italy and everything. And that was it. And right away they sent me over, right over to Naples. And there I was. Had an outfit in Naples. All on intelligence. Army intelligence. [It was a] Gas.

JUDY: And then you went down to North Africa. And you had that wonderful experience where you decoded that...

TOM: No. I went to North Africa first. They sent me from here to North Africa. Then, from North Africa because these people didn't know what was cooking in Italy, they sent



me to North Africa where they already had some experience with the French there. Then [in] North Africa they say, "You don't belong here. You got to go to Italy." And that suited me because I spoke the lingo [dialects].

JUDY: Was that after the Allies had liberated Italy? No, it was before...

TOM: No, right before. In other words, I went to Sicily first, then up to Naples. See?

JUDY: Oh, so you were stationed in North Africa? What part?

TOM: Casablanca. Yeah.

JUDY: Was it like the movies?

TOM: Hah! Right in Casablanca during the Italian campaign...

JUDY: When did you enlist?

TOM: I enlisted here in '42.

JUDY: Ah, O.K. So then, you went to North Africa first [in '42] and that is where you decoded that wonderful...



TOM: That captured document that they didn't know what the hell it was. They sent it to the French. They couldn't make it out. They sent it to the Italians and they couldn't make it out. They sent it to the Germans and they couldn't make it out. And I got hold of it and they sent it down. I looked at it and said, "For Christ's Sake, you dumb shit! It is written in Piedmontese. Don't you know where Piedmonte is?" Hee. Hee. Hee. Hee. And that is where they broke the code on it. Eh. So I put it in Italian for them and that was it. Ha. Ha.

JUDY: Isn't that funny. Oh, I love that story! That is such a good story. The Italian General was a Piedmontese, right? And he had written these orders in Piedmontese because he knew that nobody could understand them. They didn't figure out you were coming over.

TOM: Yeah, that's it. That's how wonderful the Americans were, you know. They could pick somebody out. Nobody could fool them. Heh, heh, heh, heh.

JUDY: Because of our melting pot.

TOM: That's it, by God. I always remember that one. Heh, heh, heh. I says, "All you guys come from New York and Calabria and Napoli and Sicily. You people don't know what the hell Piedmontese is." Heh, heh, heh. I remember pissing off about it. Ah geez, you make me feel like I am thirty-five years old again.



JUDY: I hope they gave you an award for that.

TOM: Ah, hell.

JUDY: Couple of medals?

TOM: Ah, naw.

JUDY: You came out as a colonel, right?

TOM: Yeah. In Intelligence you didn't get any awards. No. I retired as a colonel, period, yeah.

JUDY: You left the service after the war?

TOM: No, I stayed in the reserves after the war. They needed us because of the fact they still had to have some kind of connection with Italy or France or Germany. So they kept us together after the war to make sure they had "what's cooking."

JUDY: But then you were in Naples all during the attacks on Italy and Sicily?

TOM: Yeah, I was there because I went from North Africa to Naples.





JUDY: We had beach-head attacks over there.

TOM: Well, it was just about over, you see. It was over. That's why.

JUDY: Liberation.

TOM: Yeah. And I was in mostly that stuff. Not anything to do with fighting. I was up in the main office looking at captured documents. "Let me see it". That's it.

JUDY: Were you there when Mussolini was killed? When he was hung up near Lucca?

TOM: Yeah, mid-Italy, wasn't it?

JUDY: Northern Italy.

TOM: Up near La Mezzegra.

JUDY: So you were there all during the Allied invasion.

TOM: Finally, we were sent up to Milan where all the business was, you see. And that is where I went and visited all my relations.

JUDY: Oh you did!



TOM: Oh, sure. God, and I would go up with a jeep, you know. I had a jeep and I would drive up from Milan to my mother and father's home town right in the Alps. And Jesus Christ, I would always have eight or nine kids, right on the jeep. Everybody wanted a ride. The little kids up there wanted a ride on the jeep. And I could speak their dialect, you know. They didn't even speak Italian. I could speak their dialect. And that was fun, you know. And I'd take them around the town and up in the mountains, and whatnot. Oh, they just treated me like God from Heaven. Here's an American Captain, born and raised in America of Italian parentage. Oh God. Yeah. I was the Mayor of the town.

JUDY: I'll bet you were. So you were a Captain by that time.

TOM: Yeah. I was a Captain. They always referred to me as, "Capitano. Capitano."

JUDY: You came out as a Colonel.

TOM: Came out as a Colonel. Yeah. Well, I came out but not as a retired Colonel from the service. But then, here in those days, we had to sign up for this and be against this. So I was transferred to...I was set up out at the Presidio. And then, I was head of the outfit out at the Presidio.

JUDY: The outfit being...the CIC [Counter Intelligence Corps] division?



TOM: Yeah. Yes. Intelligence. Mostly Counter-Intelligence, but it was Intelligence.  
So, then there, I was top man there. And so, Ed Meese...you know Mr. Meese?

JUDY: Mr. Meese. Yes. [Meese was the 57<sup>th</sup> Attorney General of the United States, 1985-1988, under President Ronald Reagan.]

TOM: Yeah. Yeah. He was my advocate.

JUDY: You're kidding.

TOM: Yeah. I was just...Something came in the papers this morning or yesterday about Mr. Meese. Something...

JUDY: When you say your advocate, you mean a judge advocate?

TOM: No. No. He was administrative officer. Yeah.

JUDY: That's right. Well, anyway. Back to North Beach a little bit. Tom, I have always heard there were always fights between the Italians and the Irish in those days when you were growing up. Is that true?

TOM: No. It was before my days.



JUDY: Oh, O.K. Back in the 1800s.

TOM: Back in the 1800s. That is when St. Francis Church was built by the Irish. That was an Irish church there, you see. It was in those days.

JUDY: The one [church] on Vallejo?

TOM: Yeah, that was built by the Irish. It was the Irish that wanted a church of their own. And that was in those days when we had an Irish population here.

JUDY: That wasn't a big deal with you. When you went to school, you were all Catholics together.

TOM: Yeah. When I went to school here, we were all Catholics, up at the old church, Sts. Peter and Paul. The old church was up on Grant Ave., Dupont.

JUDY: So they had Irish and Italian.

TOM: No, not very many Irish left because they all vacated. And that is why St. Francis Church hit the dumps because of the fact that all the Irish moved out. Some of the Irish and Spanish lived on the eastern slope of Telegraph Hill. On the other side of the hill...they were Irish and Spanish. Eh.





JUDY: And out toward the Mission...?

TOM: And then they went out to the Mission. When I was a kid, all the Irish lived out at the Mission. I was the only one in the class of Italian extraction. But there was no big deal. "Oh, he is from The Beach". Heh. Heh. Heh.

JUDY: Yes, that is what it is called, The Beach, because there really was a north beach here.

TOM: And someone would say, "Son of a Beach". Hah. Hah. Hah. Hah.

JUDY: You know, I went to a party one time right down here below Chestnut. And we went down in the basement and it was all sand. Just right down in the next block there. The basements are beach sand!

TOM: My godmother, she was the only Piedmontese down there [in the area of the old beach, north of Bay Street]. She married a Sicilian down there right near the Cannery. When I was just a little, little kid, I always remember, my mother and father bringing me down there because my father was very friendly with them. And they played cards together and they admired my father because he was a real Piedmontese. A real Piedmontese... They wanted them around you know. They said they could get all the Sicilians they wanted but there were few Piedmontese. So that was it.



JUDY: So he was honored for that. Respected.

TOM: Yeah, it would be like a black would want a white to come to the house. That discrimination...

JUDY: Raised their status. Well, what was the wharf like [in North Beach] when you were growing up? The roads weren't there where we see them now.

TOM: There were not groups of business right there on the corner. There was one here, and one there, and one here. And that was it. It was mostly all fishing boats

JUDY: There were just piers?

TOM: Well, one big fishing boat. That is where they pried.

JUDY: They would all raft up?

TOM: They would all raft up together.

JUDY: So there wasn't a pier or two down there?

TOM: No, there weren't any piers. No Meigs Wharf. No Pier 39 or anything.



JUDY: Ah, so they would raft up when they came into the harbor. You went down to the water and the water lapped up on the beach there. Were there fishing boats in Aquatic Park? Was that then a lagoon?

TOM: Where is Aquatic Park?

JUDY: Aquatic Park at the end of Hyde where the cable cars end, over there by where there is that loop in front of the Maritime Museum.

TOM: Oh no, it was like just one big beach. Yeah . They didn't have it all... You know, like where you go to Fisherman's Wharf now, down there where Alioto has his place...? Those places weren't there. It was just one big place there. And all the boats come in there. And that was it.

JUDY: So they get in their little skiffs and row out to the boats.

TOM: Yeah. That's right. Yeah.

JUDY: Do you remember eating a lot of good food in those days? Fresh vegetables from the valley...? Did you eat a lot of traditional northern Italian food?

TOM: Northern Italian food. You eat polenta?



JUDY: [Laugh] Is that northern Italian?

TOM: Yeah. That was all we had was polenta. "How do you want the polenta?" "Oh, I'll take it with ... never with fish. Hee. Hee. Polenta and rabbit, you know. That was a great deal. Polenta Ussey. It comes from the French. Ussey. Polenta and birds.

JUDY: Birds. Wild birds. Ussey?

TOM: They would have polenta and birds with a sauce. Polenta Ussey.

JUDY: How do you spell that?

TOM: It is dialect. I don't even know how... U-U-S-H-E-A [sounding it out].

JUDY: The Piedmontese for oiseaux.

TOM: Yeah. That's it.

JUDY: Any kind of birds you could catch and kill?

TOM: Yeah, whatever kind of birds you could find in the market from the catching guys that used to go out and kill the birds. Hah.





JUDY: Did you have much game in those days? I mean, quail and pheasant?

TOM: Yeah, they had them. But you couldn't exactly get them so easy. We bought them from bootleggers.

JUDY: What about the Chinese? I mean, were they over on the other side of Broadway in those days? Were they much around [in North Beach]? They confined themselves pretty much to Chinatown?

TOM: Yes, because that was where all their activity was back there. It was not that they wanted to come over here. Their activity was there. I went to school, for Christ's sakes, [with a guy] he was one of the leading Chinese students. Mr. Jack Chow. He was very high in politics and he was my classmate. [California Democrat, Alternate delegate to the Democratic National Convention from California in 1960; first President of the Asian American Bar Association in 1977; first Asian to serve in the District Attorney's Office.] And we got together so well, you know, because we both understood each other well. He was born in Chinatown. Raised in Chinatown. He got way up high in political events.

JUDY: Yes, he did.

TOM: Jack Chow. We were like brothers. We went to St. Mary's together.



JUDY: Really. And you remained good friends too.

TOM: Yes, we did until his very last day. Yeah.

JUDY: Did you ever venture over into Chinatown in those days? What was it like?

TOM: It was disseminated [sic "discriminated"]. No, we never did get over there. The thing is, we weren't invited much like that, you know. Not that we were against them. No, we were for them, but we were never invited home as a group. You see. And that was where the trouble was. See. Even when it came down to war and everything, you know. That's it. We were not assimilated. And it was the old Chinese that had the power and that was it. Otherwise, Christ, I grew up with Jack Chow. We grew up together and oh man, went to college together and everything. Yes, I [would] go to some one or two events of his but that was it, you see. The ones we had from the school, over at St. Mary's. Eh.

JUDY: So Chinatown wasn't an exotic place where boys wanted to visit and explore or anything? A forbidden place...?

TOM: No, it was the tourists that went through Chinatown. It was only tourists. Kids from here, they knew what was cooking, and that was it.



JUDY: Well, interesting. Do you miss the old days in North Beach?

TOM: I do. I do. There isn't the same atmosphere that there used to be here. There isn't. There isn't the same atmosphere.

JUDY: Were you friendly with the Figonis of the hardware store?

TOM: Who? When did they start in business?

JUDY: Ah, he is joking. He is kidding me again. Such a tease!

TOM: Yeah. Christ. We were like brothers.

JUDY: So you all grew up together?

TOM: Yes, we did. In fact, he is older than I am. Well, the business is much older than we are. But, from the old days we know each other by kids even though he grew up out in the Marina. But, he was always part of the business here. Part of the North Beach here, see. We were, Christ, practically were like brothers.

JUDY: So after that area [the Marina] was developed, which followed the 1915 World's Fair, and the fill in the 1920s, a lot of Italians moved down to the Marina. Didn't they?







**Melvin "Bob" Figoni and Tom Cara  
in Figoni's Hardware Store**



TOM: Yes, they did. Yes.

JUDY: But your family didn't. They stayed right here.

TOM: They stayed right here and that was it. They didn't want to move out there. They called them the newly rich. Heh. Heh. Heh. Yeah. Moving into the Marina was moving up. Yeah. But it all depends. The ones that did that didn't even have property around here so they had to get property of their own.

JUDY: Yeah. And look what happens in an earthquake. [Laugh] You guys stayed on the alps, on the rock, of Telegraph Hill. [The sandy beach area of the Marina was hit hard by the 1989 earthquake, whereas, rocky Telegraph Hill held firm.] When did you start Thomas Cara [his business] now? You were telling me that Mary insisted you buy that building down there on Pacific. [Christopher Cara says that his father and mother bought the building on Pacific in 1960.]

TOM: Yeah. That was in '46.

JUDY: And how did you come to be the first person to bring in the coffee – espresso machines?

TOM: Oh, because I brought that home from the war.



JUDY: Oh, Ok. So when you got back from the war, you thought, well, this might be a good thing to import.

TOM: Yes, it was. And I had a connection over there because during the war I was in with a lot of business calculations back there. See. In other words, people in business, I had touch with them. The Italian companies. [One of these companies, La Pavoni, is explained further on in the interview.]

JUDY: Somehow you had an idea that that was going to catch on. That there was going to be a demand for that...?

TOM: Some way, because we'd say, "Well, I can't get the coffee like I get in Europe."

JUDY: Ah ha! And you said, ah ha! So you started bringing them in from Italy. And selling them to what? Restaurants? Bars?

TOM: Restaurants. Bars. It would all depend if you wore your hat on the left side or the right side. [Laughter]

JUDY: Probably the right side. Were the espresso drinkers the right side guys?



TOM: I want to be truthful. I am having a very enjoyable evening with you. Very much!  
Honest to God.

JUDY: Oh, I'm so glad. Well, so am I. Well, I remember meeting you back there when I came out here to college in 1957. And Matt Vidaver said, "There is the guy that has brought in the first espresso machines." [Vidaver was a long-time bartender at the original "New Pisa" restaurant at Vallejo St. and Grant Ave. and owner of the "Coexistence Bagel Shop" at Green St. and Grant Ave. in the late 1950s. He also purchased "The Coffee Gallery" across the street on Grant Ave. with Leo Riegler (sp?), one-time owner of "Vesuvio's" on Columbus Ave., circa 1958. The Coffee Gallery was a popular night spot featuring nationally-known music and comic performers like Lord Buckley.] So you started doing that in 1946?

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: And that is when you bought that property? Or Mary bought it... down on Pacific [517 Pacific]. That building. And you went down there and started your import business?

TOM: Well, we had it also on Columbus Avenue. [Columbus Ave. and Broadway from 1953 to 1960 says Christopher Cara.]

JUDY: Oh, you mentioned that. First.



TOM: That is where we started bringing them in.

JUDY: Were they immediately popular with businesses?

TOM: No, they weren't immediately popular. But that was the idea, we brought them in.

JUDY: People discovered that they really liked the coffee your machines produced. And then you were the only place that could really repair them for years.

TOM: Yeah. Right now the home models... Jesus Christ, I got a machine they sent in from Texas this morning. Nobody can repair them in Texas. House models. Heh. Heh. Heh. Heh. We get them from all over.

JUDY: Do you? All over the country?

TOM: Yeah. All over the country.

JUDY: My word, Tom. You are a legend in your own time. Well, that is all the rage these days.





TOM: Well, what they do. They ask somebody where they bought it. "Well, right over here, to the guy in San Francisco." He'll take care of it, you know.

JUDY: And you got that wonderful tin-repair guy down the peninsula who still can repair pots.

TOM: Oh yeah.

JUDY: Re-tin pots. A dying art.

TOM: What is his name? Campanaro? I forget. Cafarro! He is the guy that does the re-tinning of the pots. Yeah. They bring the pots in and they say, "Tomorrow?" We say, "Tomorrow! Next year, that's when!" [Laugh] He has to wait until four or five days to come up and pick them up, you know. Cafarro. There is no more left in San Francisco because of the business deal. These guys go into re-tin, they can't pay business taxes and what, they want them now. And that is why Cafarro is down in Burlingame. Some place in Burlingame down there. Midway or whatever it is. They have to get out of San Francisco and that's it. Yeah.

JUDY: So you are still providing rare and necessary services.

TOM: Yeah, in other words, like I got four or five pots down there now that are to be sent out, you know. And Cafarro will come in on a weekend and take them and that's it.



JUDY: For restaurants?

TOM: Well, not even for restaurants, for home. Yeah. And he'll do it and that's it. Because, Jesus Christ, otherwise... Because, number one when they make something now, they make it with an inside with stainless steel. So there is no need of re-surfacing with lead or tin. You know, the way things are now with San Francisco business, people don't want to work in business anymore around here. Because, Christ's sakes, they got the God damn business tax and whatnot, you know. It makes it tough on them.

JUDY: But you still provide these marvelous...

TOM: Yeah, we still provide re-tinning. It's a good business with us for re-tinning. No tax on it. You know it is labor. And that's it. All right. I'll let you go. It was a wonderful evening.

[End of first interview.]



Tom Cara --- Second Interview, February 24, 1994.

Interviewed by Judith Robinson, at her home in North Beach, San Francisco.

TOM: We had a Day Home here.

JUDY: Well, that was one of the things you talked about here. Go ahead. Talk about that Day Home.

TOM: All right. Well, the Day Home was started up by... it was organized by the nuns. The nuns were Nuns of the Holy Family. Holy Family Nuns. I don't know if you have that down here.

JUDY: No, we didn't talk about that. It is in your notes here though.

TOM: They had... what they referred to as the Day Home. When a mother of a family, and in those days most of the mothers all worked, would bring the children there, not the infant children, but they had to be able to walk.

JUDY: They weren't infants. Youngsters.

TOM: Yes. They could walk around by themselves. And they would bring them there at eight o'clock in the morning when they had to go to work. When they were pre-school... And even school-aged children were brought there before it was time to go



to school. And then the children would leave and go to school also. And then come back in the afternoon there and the nuns would keep them until six o'clock when the mothers would come and get them. In those days, the number fifteen car used to come up Broadway. You can put this down. When you went, I think it was at City Hall, or any place where you had to take an examination regarding the city, one of the questions they would have on this question board was, "What streetcar crosses the same street three times?"

JUDY: This is like a civil service question?

TOM: Yeah. Most like the civil service. It was pretty tough if you didn't live in the district. What would happen, you would always miss that question. Hah! And that was in North Beach. See.

JUDY: Well, tell us how the streetcar did that. You wrote that down here.

TOM: I wrote that down? How it did it? It came up Third Street and crossed Market over to Kearny Street and then came up Kearny Street to cross the first time at Columbus Avenue. It would cross Columbus Avenue once. And then make a left turn and come up as far as Broadway and come west one block on Broadway and cross Columbus Avenue the second time. And from there it would continue up Broadway as far as Powell Street and make a right turn at Powell and come down Powell Street and cross Columbus Avenue again [third time] on Powell Street.









Columbus Avenue

JUDY: And it passed in front of the Day Home, you said.

TOM: Yeah. It passed in front of the Day Home.

JUDY: It came down Powell, crossed Columbus again by the Plaza. What was the Plaza?

TOM: The Plaza. Don't we refer to it as the Plaza anymore? Washington Square!

JUDY: Oh, I'm so glad you told us this.

TOM: Washington Square. That was the Plaza. I think that originated from the Spanish.

JUDY: Sure. Then it went down Powell to...

TOM: Fisherman's Wharf.

JUDY: Ok. And it was one of the employment questions asked by City Hall.

TOM: Yeah. Yeah.



JUDY: And if somebody was from the Mission...

TOM: It would be tough. They wouldn't know what streetcar would be able to do that.

JUDY: Well, you talked a little bit about the Day Home and Thanksgiving.

TOM: Oh yeah. All right. Fine. Ok. At Thanksgiving, you know, at the Day Home, we would have... You know the people here just came over here. They didn't know about Thanksgiving Day. So their children would be assembled, in those days, on Market Street. In the old days, it was on United Railroad. United, and that was the streetcar that used to come up Broadway all the way across Powell and stop in front of the Jean Parker. The Jean Parker was the girls' school right on Broadway between Mason and Powell.

JUDY: And this was the United Railroad, originally, and it became something else. I saw in your notes. [It became the Market Street Railway.] Well, anyway, this Day Home was on Powell between Vallejo and Broadway across the street from a lumber yard.

TOM: A lumber yard. Yes. It was a lumber yard in those days.

JUDY: And they celebrated Thanksgiving there for these new immigrant children?



TOM: They wouldn't celebrate it there. The nuns would get them all on the United Railway. And United Railway would take them all the way up to the Haight Ashbury where the Mother House of nuns was. Up to Haight Ashbury. Up there. In the Haight Ashbury district. And there, they had already brought in these others from way out from Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi is practically in Daly City, you see.

JUDY: Oh. I wondered...

TOM: And they would bring them in from another territory also, see. So, there at that Mother House of the Holy Family nuns is where they would have Thanksgiving dinner for these three parishes.

JUDY: I see. Well, now you wrote something interesting. You said, "Thanksgiving my turkey flew away. It was a holiday. Thanksgiving Day."

TOM: Thanksgiving Day. [Sings these words]

JUDY: Was that a song?

TOM: Yeah. It was a song but written in litany. [He sings.] "Thanksgiving Day... the feathers goes away. It was a holiday. Thanksgiving Day." I forget the wording now. "Thanksgiving Day... the robins ran away. Thanksgiving Day ... the turkey ran away.





Thanksgiving Day... the mothers ran away. It was a holiday. Thanksgiving Day."  
Something like that.

JUDY: Well now, did you go to these Thanksgiving... [dinner]s?

TOM: Oh. Yes. I went because I was at the Day Home here. You see, my mother ...  
We lived, in those days, where I was born, on Filbert and Grant Ave. on the way up to  
Telegraph Hill there, see. That's where I was born. And so, my mother then was  
working for the Lewis Packing Company. And the Lewis Packing Company was right  
down the street here, a block or so, right on the end of ... right down on Columbus Ave.  
where Safeway is down there now.

JUDY: Oh, like Bay and Taylor?

TOM: It was Columbus Ave., where it comes out ... the streetcar comes down Mason  
Street... and the block after Mason is Taylor. Isn't it?

JUDY: Yes.

TOM: All right. The factory was on the corner of Columbus Ave. and Taylor. And that  
is where my mother worked. And so, she would go down there. And I would [go to the  
Day Home]... You see, afterwards in the home on Powell, they would take the children  
that just had to come in there after school. So that way, when the mothers were



released from work they would pick them up there. And they would stay there maybe until six o'clock. And then the mothers would bring the children home with them, see.

JUDY: Community day care.

TOM: Yeah. It's a day care. And it is run by the Holy Family nuns.

JUDY: So now, your brother Charles was older than you?

TOM: Yeah. He was five years my senior.

JUDY: And there was you and Charles. Charles was the oldest. And then, Sue?

TOM: And after, my sister was born. She was born eight years after I was. If I was born in 1910, she was born in 1918. And my brother was born in 1905. And he was born in Italy, see. And then, my father, in those days, left Italy. And Christ, it was right after the earthquake and fire so he didn't have no trouble getting a job. He didn't speak much English but he knew how to take a look at the blueprints and he knew what the hell was cooking. So he had no trouble getting jobs. And he got a job in San Francisco like nothing. So he went to work for a German company here and he stayed with them all his life.

JUDY: Oh. Really. What was the name of it?



TOM: Goodman Company. Goodman Builders.

JUDY: I'll be darned. Is that still the same ones that are Goodman Lumber now?

[Goodman Lumber at 491 Bayshore, closed in 2000 after 51 years in business.]

TOM: No, this is lumber but they were construction.

JUDY: Oh. Ok.

TOM: I don't know if it's the same or not.

JUDY: So you went to the daycare as I assume your brother did and Sue when they were young, too. That was all for Italians. Were they all Italians – largely all Italian?

TOM: Well, they were Italian and French because they were up on Powell and Broadway. And you know, the French Quarters were very close by there.

JUDY: Oh, tell us all about that.

TOM: Oh, there were French Quarters. They weren't French. They preferred people said French, but they were Basques.



JUDY: That would account for all the Basque restaurants in the area.

TOM: Yeah. They were Basque, you see, but they spoke French. And there were Basque restaurants from Powell down to the beginning of Chinatown which would be Grant Avenue. And those were the Basque restaurants in those days.

JUDY: Of which we have a few remaining. [on Broadway]

TOM: I guess so, yes.

JUDY: The Basque and Des Alps... Well, I'll be darned, so you had little French Basque chums there as well.

TOM: Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Oh God, and my father, he already knew how to handle French because he picked up the French language in Switzerland. That is where he learned the French language. And so he had no trouble at all with any Frenchman.

JUDY: So he came over about 1906?

TOM: Well, he was already here when my brother was born. [1905] He didn't come up here. He came down south to Santa Barbara. And then, the earthquake and fire, he thought, geez, there would be a lot of work up there. And that's when he came up after





the earthquake and fire. And sure enough, he knew everything about construction, so they gave him a job right away. Of course, he didn't speak too much English but there were some people around, a lot of French that had lost property, so they could do the translation for him. And that was it.

JUDY: Well, as we looked at that wonderful picture of him, he is a very distinguished handsome fellow. He obviously got quickly involved in the community because there are pictures of the Bosci, a group of Italian citizens and leaders, I guess.

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: So he was active in the community.

TOM: Yes. Yes. He was pretty fair that way.

JUDY: You also talked a little bit about the church, just going back to your childhood. You were an altar boy.

TOM: Oh yes. I was an altar boy.

JUDY: When Sts. Peter and Paul was at Dupont and Filbert?

TOM: Dupont and Filbert, yeah.



JUDY: Dupont being Grant [Avenue] now. And you talked about how the priests lived on the premises.

TOM: The priests lived in the same quarters, you know. It would be like a house here and a connecting house next to it, you know. And that's where the priests lived.

JUDY: Well, then apparently they used to have the children's Sunday School at the old site after the new church was built. [The new Sts. Peter and Paul faces Washington Square on Filbert a block down from the site of the old church.]

TOM: Yes. Yes. They still had some of them up there. And some of them even attended Mass up there because of the fact that down here there was just the lower ground floor of the church, you see. That was before they built the upper part of the church. And that is the reason why you kept them up there and they went to nine o'clock Mass in the old church up there, see. They all referred to it as the old church, see. And so that is where they had the children, pre-communion ones. They went up there for the communion lessons and what not, you know. And then, they made their first communions up there, see. And then they kept them up there and that is where the Salesian Boy's Club first originated was up there, see. You had the club up there and everything. And they had all your athletics up there because on the side of the church there was a big ground where you could play baseball there. So they would teach them baseball and everything. And inside, you had the remains of the old church, which had



a very high ceiling so you could have a good basketball court up there. And then on the side they had another construction of handball. So they turned out a lot of handball players.

JUDY: Wow. You have a note here where you say the crypt is where the Mass is celebrated and then you wrote, "Mass flowers blew fuse." What was that about?

TOM: Oh. Yeah. [Laugh] What happened you see... the altar boys they would take out...., if they were having flowers or something. Well, you had the wire on the flower and sometimes they would take that flower and stick it into the plug and blow the fuse. [Laugh]

JUDY: [Laugh] And then, you talked about [how] the communion wine didn't make it from church to church.

TOM: You see, they didn't have the faculty [sic "facility"], the places, to make the wine so they still made the wine up there [the old site]. So, when you were an altar boy down there you had to go [up] there and get the wine, see. Or the opposite, if it was down here you had to bring it up there. And so if you brought the wine up there you made sure that they didn't kill all the wine. But if there was some wine left in the... What do you call them now?

JUDY: Chalice?



TOM: No, the Chalice is the big one. What do you call the little wine...?

JUDY: Communion cups?

TOM: You call them.... What the hell...!

JUDY: Christo...the Cruet?

TOM: The Cruets. Yeah! And so, you would come down here and bring the wine up there, and then bring the empty cruets down here. [You] left some wine in there from the celebration of a Mass. Boy, they always try to leave a little in there, so that way when you get through with ... You know, this is all during Prohibition, you see.

JUDY: Oh. Right!

TOM: Yeah. That way,...no use bringing the wine back. So mmm, boy, we finished the wine! [Laugh]

JUDY: [Laugh] So, all that wine was made in cellars in the neighborhood as you said. And upstairs the main part of the old church was turned into a beautiful basketball court. And a space on one side was converted to a handball court. And the old church had a large open space that was used for softball games. [On the left side, says Tom]





TOM: That's just it.

JUDY: And you say the top of it was converted into a large beautiful club pool room.

TOM: Yeah, a big pool room. Yes.

JUDY: And a small pool room was opened in one of the downstairs rooms.

TOM: Yes. Uh Huh.

JUDY: These are all for the youngsters. The Salesians...?

TOM: Yes, in other word, you belonged to the club. Upstairs was where the seniors were, kids over fifteen or what. See, they were upstairs. And the juniors were downstairs. They kept them apart, you know.

JUDY: Was it the boys and girls? Salesian boys and girls...?

TOM: No. Just boys. No girls.

JUDY: But there were lots of activities for you then, a place to go and play. That was the center of your...?



TOM: The center of the universe. [Laugh]

JUDY: Right. [Laugh] Well, there were a lot of wonderful things to do. My gosh!  
And then you said there was a candy booth upstairs.

TOM: Oh yes, upstairs there was a candy booth where you could buy your candy.  
What the hell, there wasn't a hell of a lot of entertainment. And you always had a nickel  
to buy a bar of chocolate, you know.

JUDY: Mr. Masso?

TOM: Musso. Musso. Musso.

JUDY: He was the caretaker?

TOM: Yeah, he was the caretaker. He lived on the premises there. Mr. Musso.

JUDY: Oh, I love it.

TOM: Jeez, you really got some good notes there.

JUDY: Thanks to you, kiddo.



TOM: Boy. They are going to go for that.

JUDY: So we went through the Thanksgiving and the railroad and the street that it crosses three times ...all right now... Church picnic. Tell [us] about that. You said, "Father is a Trienchieri." Trienchieri?

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: He was a famous Piedmontese?

TOM: Piedmontese. [He corrects Judy's pronunciation.]

JUDY: And as an altar boy, you said you could hear him and father Francesco speaking Piedmontese in the Sacristy.

TOM: Yeah, that's right.

JUDY: Later Father Craven was another one. Was he Piedmontese too?

TOM: I think he was. Yes. Cravero. Not Craven.

JUDY: But then you went on this wonderful annual [church] picnic in San Rafael Park.



TOM: Yeah. San Rafael. We would come down. Take the trolley. Go to the ferry and get on the ferry that would go to Sausalito. And then in Sausalito you would get on the train that went up past Fairfax and right close by to the picnic grounds.

JUDY: Boy! That must have been fun!

TOM: Oh, it was one year's celebration. It was.

JUDY: Families or just children?

TOM: Oh, no, family. The whole family...the whole family...the whole family, see. It was a family gathering ...family gathering.

JUDY: That little train from Sausalito that went out to San Rafael. That must have been great.

TOM: Yes, it was. It was really a good, good ...well, you might say a good holiday for that one day, you know. You took the train and everything, especially when you were kids. You weren't exposed to taking a train from here to there. The only train my folks would take me on was a train to Oakdale. Where is Oakdale?

JUDY: Where is Oakdale? Right.





TOM: Over there past Riverbank.

JUDY: Where is that?

TOM: Where is Riverbank? [Laugh] That was up in the Central Valley up there. And we would go up there. That is where I would spend a lot of my childhood because they were friends of my father and mother. And they were friends when they lived out...not Twin Peaks...lived out in... Bernal Heights, maybe. They lived out in the Bernal Heights district. And that is where we would go, my mother and father, and they would have a real picnic. That was getting out of the city.

JUDY: [Laugh] Right. Take a large picnic basket and go to Bernal Heights.

TOM: Yeah. Go to Bernal Heights, you see. And then, of course, the church would have the annual picnic every year. And that was up in the picnic grounds that we were just talking about now, the picnic grounds out at Fairfax. San Rafael, in those days. Well, it was picnic grounds, like a ...

JUDY: A big park? A stream or something?

TOM: Yeah. Yeah. All right.



JUDY: Were there swings and things? Ponds?

TOM: Well, it was more like for family gatherings. Picnic tables and whatnot. They had a lot of extra activities over there. And it was getting out to the country, you know. It was a pleasure for some of the kids. You never get a chance to leave town. But then, you would get a good ride on a boat and then get on the choo choo train.

JUDY: Oh, that sounds heavenly. Well, one of the other things that is here in these notes... you talk about the difference between the dialects. We talked quite a bit about that last time; Piedmontese versus the Genovese. But you have got a wonderful little Italian poem here. You said as a teenager you remember the Genovese song that everybody knew. Me vergie piagi..

TOM: [He sings] Me vergie piagiamo che. Me vergie piagana ranga. Este me farma ga, Ge rhumpo la conda. Oh Marianna la compagna quando il sole tramontera. Qui sa quanto. Qui sa quanto. Ritornera . Boom. Boom.

JUDY: Oh that's wonderful. What does that mean?

TOM: I have to translate it!

JUDY: Is it dirty?



TOM: No. It is not dirty. All right. Me vergie piagiamo che. See it is not even in Italian. It is in Genovese. Because that was the lingo around here. Because they were the popular people around here. Genovese.

JUDY: Well now, what does that Genovese song sort of mean?

TOM: Me vergie piagiamo che. I want to get a wife. Me vergie piagana ranga. I want to get a crippled one.

JUDY: Crippled one?

TOM: Yeah. Ranga. In other words, she is crippled somewhere in corp [body].

Este me farma ga. And if she angers me. Ge rhumpo la conda. I'll break her other leg.

[Laughter] And that was the famous song. Oh Marianna la compagna quando il sole tramontera. [Oh, Marianna go to the country when the sun rises.] Qui sa quanto. Qui sa quanto. Ritonerà . [When will she come back?] Boom. Boom. [He sings all the Italian verse.]

JUDY: Oh, that's wonderful Tom. So you have that Genovese dialect down.



TOM: Oh, because you had to speak Genovese around here. Otherwise, they would say, yeah, you are a foreigner. That is why the Genovese, they stuck together, you know. Well, what else are you going to do?

JUDY: OK. Oh, now you talked about Father Trank?

TOM: Father Triencheri. We always referred to him as Father Trank. He was a Piedmontese.

JUDY: And he taught you the teachings and practices of Don Bosco. What is that about?

TOM: Don Bosco is the patron saint of students and whatnot. He had the schools. He originated all the schools in Turin. He was a head... in other words, the number one man of student education in the vicinity of Turin. You see. They were Piedmontese.

JUDY: And so Father Triencheri was a follower of...?

TOM: Piedmontese also. A follower of Don Bosco.

JUDY: Triencheri is [spelled out] T-r-i-e-n-c-h-i-e-r-i...

TOM: Yeah, Triencheri.





JUDY: And you said he was responsible for all the good work with youth of the day.

TOM: Yes. He was the one who started up the Boys' Clubs and whatnot.

JUDY: Ok. Was that the origin of the Salesian? So he was then a Salesian Father?

TOM: Yeah. He was a Salesian Father, in other words, an off print of Don Bosco.

JUDY: I see. OK. And that became the Salesian Boys Club. Still going on today. I saw them yesterday playing with their uniforms on ...on Friday. And you said you didn't have to be a Genovese to be part of this large group?

TOM: No. You didn't.

JUDY: Especially since he was Piedmontese. Oh now, you mentioned again the Calabrese who lived on Kearny between Union and Vallejo.

TOM: I still kid people when they give me the address Kearny. I says, "You Calabrese?" "No, why do you ask I'm Calabrese?" "Well, what the hell, you living on Kearny Street?" "Oh yeah, Kearny Street. You're talking about years and years ago."  
[Laughter]



JUDY: Kearny between Union and Vallejo.

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: Gosh, isn't that something. Everything was very colonized.

TOM: Yes, it was.

JUDY: And you mentioned that they had the most spectacular personalities and dramatic leaders?

TOM: They were. They had. They had a lot of personality. It was in-grown in them. The Calabrese had wonderful personality.

JUDY: And were they dramatic and lyrical?

TOM: Yes, they were. Yes.

JUDY: Ah. So they were known for their...?

TOM: Drama and whatnot, see.

JUDY: Were they musical too?



TOM: Well, not so much. They were musical but not heavy on one thing.

JUDY: But it was more their presentation...?

TOM: More the small little dance they had, you know. Yeah.

JUDY: And they were all under the influence of Father Trienchieri.

TOM: They were great followers. They worked with Father Piperni. He was the only Calabrese, you see. He was the one that came here with Father... Well, I forget the Irish name. It wasn't Callahan. I forget it now. But, anyway, Father Piperni, he was the leader of the Calabrese because he was from Calabrese descent.

JUDY: And he was at the church.

TOM: He was at the church. Yeah.

JUDY: Piperni. P-r... [spells out] How do you spell that?

TOM: P-i-p-e-r-n-i. Father Piperni.



JUDY: And I guess the Directors of the Boys Club were Angelo Fusco, Fred Scolati, and Russ Gima?

TOM: Gumina. G-u-m-i-n-a [spells out name].

JUDY: Well, that sort of gets us through your youth there now... Maybe you would like to go on now and tell more about things you have been storing up in your memory bank.

TOM: Where? Down in my feet?

JUDY: [Laugh] Bring it up from your feet. Well, I thought it would be kind of interesting to talk a little bit about you bringing in the first...really in America...didn't you....some of the first coffee espresso machines after the war.

TOM: Well, of course, when I landed ...when I got up into Milan after the war, I was exposed to café espresso up there. And I got a taste to it and then I met people that were in the construction business of La Pavoni. I met them.

JUDY: That was their name?

TOM: That was the name of the company they had. They started up in 1905, so you can imagine that was an old firm over there. La Pavoni. And I still handle their machine. The ones I have down in the shop. I have one of their old, old ones. The





serial number on it is 193. You can imagine! All right, that was the first machine that I brought in. And we were already bringing in cookware from France. And so, they knew me at the Custom House. Getting back to the machine in Milan... All right fine, they wanted to know. Sure, I'll handle the machine when I get home from the war. And that is what it was. So, when we were already in business and the machine came in, Customs phoned me up. "Mr. Cara, will you kindly come down here? We have a little problem." So, I got down there. We were already bringing in [cookware]...they knew we had already started on Grant Avenue. So fine, I went down to Customs and went in. They already had the machine there. They said, "What the hell you got here? An atom bomb?" [Laughter] Oh, I thought I'd die!

JUDY: They had never seen anything like that. It was so complicated.

TOM: No. They never did see anything like it. That's why, see. I got the very same machine down the shop now. It is the machine number 193 or something. You can imagine! And so I says, "No, it is an espresso machine." They said, "What the hell is an espresso machine?" [Laughter] You know when they said, "What have you got here, an atom bomb?", because in '47, that was when the atom bomb was popular. And I said, "No, an espresso machine." "What the hell's an espresso machine?" I says, "Jeez, weren't you in the service?" He says, "Yeah." I says, "I don't think you were in Germany. I don't think you were in France. I don't think you were in Italy. Switzerland." He says, "No, he said, "I was down in the damn South Seas." That is why he didn't know what an espresso machine was. [Laughter]



JUDY: So, they cleared it for you.

TOM: Oh, they cleared it. Yes. God almighty! And down in the shop I have the very first machine. Of course, when I had it taken back, I had to have them rebuild it and re-chrome it and everything. But the serial number and everything is still on there. You know, 193.

JUDY: How interesting. But it was up there around Milan where you had your first espresso.

TOM: Yeah. I had my first espresso in Milan.

JUDY: And you perceived that it might be a good idea to bring to America.

TOM: Yes. Yes. Yes.

JUDY: So after you got out of the service you started importing. You started bringing in the A Bomb machines and then you were importing all kinds of French cookware and those wonderful copper pans.

TOM: Yeah. We were bringing in the French cookware, you know. I even forget what the hell you cook on now, you know. They are not made of clay... they are made of ...







**Captioned: "With love to Tom Cara  
who lets off steam with style,  
Jerry DiVecchio"**

JUDY: Oh yeah. The crock pots. The crockery.

TOM: Yeah. The crockery ones. And we were bringing those in, see. We had quite a business going on. But then we started working on café espresso machines and that got pretty popular. Nowadays, we don't want to bother with anything else because it is mostly for the espresso machine for the home. Most people now use the machine to be in the home. They don't want to go out and put out... I don't know what the hell they pay...a dollar and a half, two dollars for an espresso drink where they buy it.... But you know, they are addicted to it so they need it in the house! [Laughter] They don't want to get up in the morning and go out someplace and get it. They want to have it right there. So they are addicted to that type of coffee and that's why we grew right in with it, you see. Yeah.

JUDY: Well, then you got to be doing a lot of repair work.

TOM: We were given a lot of repair because they don't last forever. They break down and nobody else in the country has parts to it. So that is what our business is – to repair. And it is a good thing we stuck with it.

JUDY: It sure is. Do you have clients all over the country?





TOM: We do. Christ. I just got an order from ...where the hell was it? Oh, just one or two days ago from back in...oh, Christ, he wants parts and he can't get parts out of New York. And then, three days ago we get another from up in Oregon. They are writing to us from Oregon, you know. "We got a machine up here the people don't know what to do with it." "Fine." "You got the parts?" "You need the parts? We got the parts."

JUDY: I'll be darned. Can you still get parts from Italy? Or do you pretty much rely on your own resources now?

TOM: No. No. We have certain parts, like making all the gaskets, you know... something that you can make by the thousands. That we do directly, you see.

JUDY: Well, you must have been one of the first places that had that wonderful European cookware. Zabaglione pots and all those wonderful things that now, of course, are so popularized by so many of these larger outfits.

TOM: Yes. The big larger outfits, you know. What are you going to do, for Christ's sakes? They buy a copper pot, we say like a zabaglione pot. You go from family to family to family to family. Down the line.

JUDY: Not a lot of turnover in pots.



TOM: No, there isn't a lot of turnover in copper pots. There isn't, see. So, what the hell, all we do is repairs of the espresso machines. We sold a lot of the home model. They don't last forever. They have to bring them in. Jesus Christ! Can they have it yesterday, tomorrow? Yeah, we can give it to you two days ago. We are the only ones that can repair them. And that is what is keeping us going. We don't pay rent. We own the building and so what the hell.

JUDY: Now you started out on Grant. Where was your first shop on Grant? At what streets?

TOM: On Grant Avenue, 1306 Grant Avenue. And that is between Green and Vallejo. That's where we started and that was thirty-five dollars a month.

JUDY: Oh, my gosh!

TOM: I think they pay like three hundred and forty, three hundred and fifty. Something like that. I don't know exactly. But that is what they are paying up around in there now.

JUDY: I'm sure it is a lot more than that. More like three thousand a month.

TOM: Maybe so. [Laughter]

JUDY: So then when was it that Mary and you bought the place on Pacific?



TOM: In '60. We bought it in 1960, thanks to Mary.

JUDY: And that is where you still are and have your shop downstairs.

TOM: Shop downstairs and two offices upstairs. We rent them out as offices. [There is a showroom on the street floor.]

JUDY: Well now, right along there [Grant Avenue] is another wonderful store, Figoni Brothers Hardware.

TOM: Oh Christ, Figonis has been there since the last century.

JUDY: Are they Genovese? The Figonis?

TOM: Oh, I don't know. They are Jewish. [Laugh. He is kidding.] No, that is Genovese when we say Jewish. No, they are Genovese. Their grandfather started the place. So it is an old, old place. [it was started in 1907 by Nick Capurro who joined with Louis Figoni, Melvin's ("Bob") uncle in 1915] And we send people up there and they send people to us. We work together, see.

JUDY: It is two brothers now that still run it? [Figoni's Hardware closed in 2000].



TOM: No, one Figoni and then his son. Not two brothers, Figoni and his son. Figoni was alone.

JUDY: And he is your contemporary? The father.

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: So you all went to school together?

TOM: No, we didn't go to school together because he didn't go to Catholic schools or anything. Even though he bats with the right...

JUDY: [Laughter]

TOM: What are you laughing about?

JUDY: You taught me what that means.

TOM: Yeah. [Laughter]

JUDY: Who were some of the other notable Italians you grew up with or, some of your friends in the neighborhood? You still are pals. Do people still hang out at the Italian Athletic Club? Is that a favorite community center? I'm just curious.





TOM: Not so much now, no. I didn't belong so I don't know.

JUDY: Were the Italians pretty cohesive? Even though you said last time the Church was the unifying ...?

TOM: Well, the Church was the unifying thing. Yes. But of course it was always to the right hand. Our big thing was with the American Legion. You know, we were....jeez, we were all Army men.

JUDY: Sure. Tell us something about that.

TOM: See, it was the Legion. Our Legionnaires. And [what] we have right now is...oh, what the hell was in this morning's paper... Judge Lawrence Mana. Retired now, but he...God damn, I just read something about it.

JUDY: He was active in your Legion Chapter?

TOM: Yeah. Very active. Very active.

JUDY: Well, it is a chapter of a lot of Italian origin Army men?



TOM: Well, I guess it is. Well, mostly of the district here. See, like, I and Lawrence Mana were the ones that got it organized to get an American Legion post. [Tom Cara traveled to Europe in 1933 with Steve Mana, Lawrence's brother, after they both graduated from college.] Organized here in North Beach, see. There were two of us. He was already a Judge at that time.

JUDY: Oh, you are one of the originators.

TOM: Yeah, North Beach Post American Legion. Yeah, they respect us very much because we were the first to get going on something like that.

JUDY: It was a large Post, I guess?

TOM: Well, it is a good Post. Well, like everything else, people keep dying, keep dying, keep dying, you know. And you don't have very many to gather in, you know, because there is not much money. They'd say, "Ah, I don't want to belong to the Legion, what the hell." It is all something that has gone for a long time. Excuse me, huh. [He takes a drink of wine.] What is this?

JUDY: You know, what I'll bet it is. Ernest and Julio.

TOM: Oh sure! [Laughter.]



JUDY: [Laughter] I figured it out. Some other nice Italian gentleman has provided you with... [wine].

TOM: Ernest's wife still comes in our shop.

JUDY: Is that so?

TOM: Oh yes, after all these years. Ernest's wife. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. We know 'em from years and years and years ago. Still comes down and stops.

JUDY: Well, there is an outfit that built itself up.

TOM: Oh boy, didn't they! Ah. Yeah. They are very nice people though.

JUDY: In spite of the brothers fighting each other?

TOM: Yes. Yes. But, all I did was business with the wife, period, didn't bother about the other brother or what.

JUDY: Did you know them, the family, going back some years?

TOM: Well, going back, you know, twenty, thirty years. You see. They were very friendly with.... very, very good friends of mine where I spent my ... not spent my



childhood, but I spent my vacations up in Oakdale. And the Crotches up there were friends of my mother and father. They would send me up there in Oakdale for the summer instead of staying here in San Francisco. And that's where they were friends of Ernest and Julio Gallo. And that is how we knew each other.

JUDY: Is the Italian community still pretty strong and proud of its heritage?

TOM: No, I don't think so. No.

JUDY: It has got so integrated now.

TOM: Yes. You know, they forget about it. Christ. They got a little bigger than the others and they don't want to be... I don't think they want to be known as anything small. Anything like that... [All this was spoken in a very low voice tone.] But, in our Legion, here we are. We're Americans, period. We are proud of our own and that's it, period. And we have a time and that's it, period. We don't want to say, I get it from Italy or get it from France or get it from Germany, or what. Here we are good G.I. Americans.

JUDY: All right. Well, that is kind of the way it is supposed to be. But, now your family spoke Piedmontese at home but you went to school and learned English from your infancy, I guess. How did your family deal with the language?





TOM: Which language?

JUDY: Did your father and mother come to speak English in the home?

TOM: No.

JUDY: They always spoke Italian?

TOM: Not Italian.

JUDY: Piedmontese. But, you children all spoke English amongst each other then.

TOM: Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Yeah, [and] Piedmontese. You know, you got French in there. You got Spanish in there. You have a lot of words in Spanish... and in Italian, sure. But they always spoke dialect. Always dialect. La questione bene la Piesola.

JUDY: Oh, that is strange.

TOM: Te cappi?

JUDY: Poquito. [Laughter]



TOM: Where did you take a pee?

JUDY: [Laughter]

TOM: Back in Italy, when we talk to somebody, I'd say: "Te cappi?" And they'd say, "Cosse e tiesto. Te cappi?" And they'd say, "Yeah, capito." Ma sicuro. A capisco. No, in Englesea. "Take a pee." Te pischatte. Te shatta." [Laughter]

JUDY: [Laughter]

TOM: That's what it means in English! Yeah, take a pee. [Laughter] Oh Christ. They would go nuts when they knew. Oh, they laughed. [Laughter]

JUDY: [Laughter]

TOM: Oh God. You know the last time I was over there poking around and they would say, "Remember the wartime? Yeah. Take a pee."

JUDY: Oh, that is wonderful, Tom. So you would drive around in your jeep there. Would you take a pal up there?

TOM: Oh Gawd. I would go up to the town, I'd have five or six in the town that would want to take a ride with me. I would bring them as far up as Domodossola, you know.



Then, I had to stop because we can't cross the border. "You people can't. Get out."  
You had to get off. And then, I would bring them back to town. Back to their home town. Yeah.

JUDY: That must have been a marvelous experience for you then.

TOM: It really was. Yes.

JUDY: Being there with your roots, even with all the war going on. Were those towns pretty well spared from war damage up there in the Alps?

TOM: They were pretty well spared. It was too hard to get up there. You couldn't get up there with big heavy armaments of war. Christ, you are right in the Alps. You were lucky you could get up with a jeep.

JUDY: Is that near the Dolomite Pass?

TOM: On the other side of the Dolomite Pass. Yeah, right in the other side.

JUDY: I drove through there when I was going up from Italy to Germany. Were your parents glad that they had emigrated?



TOM: Oh, my father was very much American. Oh God, he got into the union here, you know, the Workers' Union. No, he was very influential. No, he really...the hell with France, the hell with all of them. He was strictly San Franciscan. Strictly San Franciscan. Very good union member and everything, you know. And work[ed] very hard to get whatever he could for the people that worked under him, you know, in the union. He was a very very... sancticious man when it came to union labor and work. Yeah. He was very strong that way.

JUDY: As I guess a lot of his colleagues were. And how about your mother? Did they ever go back to visit after...?

TOM: Oh yeah, my mother went back two, maybe three, times. Yeah, my father the same, you know.

JUDY: But she wasn't homesick. She was glad to be here too?

TOM: Oh no, she wasn't homesick... She was glad to be a San Franciscan. So my father was too...the same, even though he practically grew up in Switzerland.... where it was "What flag? What flag you wearing?"

JUDY: Tri-color. Or, tri-counties. Well now, tell a little bit about how your dad bought his first property and that business where he wanted to have that corner up near where Coit Tower is now. And he lost it.





TOM: Well, I don't know how the hell he just...some way or other he bought it. And that was it.

JUDY: You first lived at Dupont [now Grant Ave.] and Filbert. Then he started buying some properties. Right?

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: And you bought this property right across the street on Lombard. And that is where you had the winemaking. And then, did you buy that property up the hill or was that your dad? The Lombard Street apartments, where you and Mary live. Was that you or did your father acquire that property?

TOM: Oh, oh. You mean the two flats up there? Oh, no. We bought it. Yeah, Mary and I bought that one together. And then, we also, in the family, [bought] down...the one down on Lombard. That's where my dad bought that property in 1920. I think they paid \$7,000 for it. I don't know whether seven or twenty or what. I mean, I was just a kid then. I wouldn't know. And my sister, she is the one who knows more figures because she does more of the bookkeeping in the house. [Tom's sister died in 1999.]

JUDY: So that is where you were pretty much raised then.



TOM: Yeah. I was practically raised there, see. And then we owned ... right on Lombard it goes...before they built Coit Tower ...when they come around and then go around like this and go up. Well, my father had the corner... right there on the corner of Lombard where the road makes the turn now to come up. And that was my father's.

JUDY: Do you remember any of the characters in San Francisco? I'm just trying to think. Of course, Lillie Hitchcock Coit died in 1922 [she died July 22, 1929 at age 86], so you were only twelve. You wouldn't have remembered much about that. Were there any left-over Gold Rush type characters, or early people you remember as a boy? Emperor Norton wasn't around.

TOM: No.

JUDY: What about theater and opera? Did you used to go? Did you ever hear Tetrzzini or anybody like that?

TOM: No, because I was already out of school and away from home and that's why I didn't know anything about it.

JUDY: Did your family attend opera and theater here?

TOM: No, they weren't [interested]... It was all construction.



JUDY: So entertainment was more...?

TOM: Everything was in the church, period. What the church did. They did. That's where it was. And it is still the same way, I think.

JUDY: But when you were growing up, they started having movies and things. Now was the Pagoda Theater here when you were a boy? The theater right here that the Chinese had...

TOM: Where is the Pagoda?

JUDY: The one across from the Plaza [Washington Square Park].

TOM: You mean the Washington?

JUDY: Yeah. Before it was the Pagoda, it was the Washington Theater? Is that right? [In 1909 the Washington Square Theater was built for live performances. Enrico Caruso sang there. Soon after, films took over and it became a movie house under the successive names of Milano, Palace Theater, and the Pagoda Palace Theater.] Well, now, did you used to go to movies there for a nickel or something?

TOM: Yeah. All right. Yes. For that, yeah. I don't know whether you classify that as something.







**Milano Theatre**



JUDY: That is a beautiful theater.

TOM: I guess it is. I haven't been in there for years. [It closed in 1994.]

JUDY: No, I haven't either. What about libraries? Was there a library in North Beach that you used?

TOM: Yeah. Library. I see they are having a beef about the library. [Land abutting the North Beach Library was disputed. It is raising funds for renovation in 2006.]

JUDY: Oh, I'll tell you!

TOM: Well, the library was up on Powell Street. There was a library on Powell if I remember... on Powell Street.

JUDY: Ok. Were there festivals like there are in Italy and Spain? Maybe in Spring and Fall?

TOM: No. Not that I know of.

JUDY: Well, do you remember things like pasta making? I mean, was that a big thing in North Beach? There were all these pasta making factories and things like that.



TOM: There was the one over on Green Street. That was a big baby. That was a big pasta one. And I can't think of anybody else making the pasta. I remember them. The one that was the very favorite delicatessen was.... Oh Christ, I forget her name now, used to be next to Rossi Market [Vallejo near Columbus Ave.] there. You remember?

JUDY: Oh yeah. They had the most wonderful sausage with fennel.

TOM: Oh, you remember that?

JUDY: I sure do.

TOM: Gloria! [the delicatessen on Vallejo St. that closed about that time]

JUDY: Gloria! Gloria.

TOM: Gloria. Boy, that is something I really miss. Gloria. Yeah.

JUDY: Sick when they went out of business.

TOM: Yeah. Gloria. Jesus, and she was so nice. Oh, God, when they went out of business, it was so terrible. You know, Molinari changed so many times it is pitiful. Who's who there, what's what?



JUDY: So in those days, there were lots... more....delicatessens.

TOM: Yes.

JUDY: Well, the ones that are still up.... Panelli Brothers are still there and Florence Ravioli is still there. You remember them. Were they there then?

TOM: Florence was, yes.

JUDY: Did your mother shop in those places?

TOM: Yes and no.

JUDY: [Judy shows Tom a book: "Saints Peter and Paul Church –The Chronicles of 'the Italian Cathedral' of the West, 1884-1984", by Alessandro Baccari, Jr., Vincenza Scarpaci, and Rev. Father Gabriel Zavattaro.] Now, this picture that shows your father and your brother Charles reads: "Members of the Don Bosco Council at a gathering of the Salesian Novitiate in Richmond, California, October, 24, 1929. The Council was founded by Brother Rafaele Piperni who is seated in front holding a cane. On his left was Father Robert Wieczorek and Father Orestie Trinchieri; on his right, Father Bartholomew Pellegrino." [page 122, print #116] So your father was on the Council of that Boy's Club.



TOM: I guess so. Yeah.

JUDY: He is a very distinguished man.

TOM: Nonno. Right here.

JUDY: They called him Nonno?

TOM: Well, I referred to him as Nonno, our grandfather. You know, the grandfather is Nonno, you see.

JUDY: Oh, I see. But he was your father.

TOM: He was my father. My children already referred to him as Nonno.

JUDY: Oh, I see. Your children called him that. So they did know your father. What are your father's and mother's years? Do you remember when they were born and died?

TOM: No, I don't remember.





JUDY: But your children knew their grandparents, huh? On both sides? Mary's and your parents?

TOM: Yes, my children knew their grandparents. Yes. [Christopher Cara says online in "Best of the Bay", "I started drinking coffee when I was four. My grandma (Mary's mother), used to spoon espresso onto my vanilla ice-cream, but eventually she just started sprinkling ground beans over it."]

JUDY: So how old was he when he died? Eighties or nineties?

TOM: My sister would know all that information. How old was he? Hell, he died at 72! I remember that now. He died at 72. Died young.

JUDY: Well, he worked hard all his life, hadn't he?

TOM: Died at 72.

JUDY: Well, he is a dashing man.

TOM: Oh, this is my brother.

JUDY: Yes, and what a handsome man he is. Like yourself. Now here is another picture of your brother at a dinner in honor of the beatification of the blessed John



Busco, circa 1929. Among those at the head table were Mayor Angelo Rossi and Archbishop Edward Hanna. [page 123, print #120]

TOM: This is my brother someplace.

JUDY: I think he is right here with the circle around his head. Dark-haired fellow.

TOM: Yeah. That's him all right. Yeah. I know some of these...I can't think of their names. They are all gone. What's the use.

JUDY: I don't see any pictures of you in there.

TOM: No. I wasn't in on the thing.

JUDY: Now, did Sue also go to school. Did she go to college as well?

TOM: I don't know about college.

JUDY: If you were born in 1910 Tom, there must have been a lot of the City that was still in rubble when you were a boy from the earthquake and fire. Do you remember much of that?

TOM: No, there wasn't.



JUDY: They cleaned it up pretty fast.

TOM: Yes. I don't remember any rubble. [Most of North Beach was wooden architecture, so the buildings burned down to the ground.]

JUDY: Do you remember the 1915 World's Fair? ["The Panama-Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco"] That was something I wanted to ask.

TOM: Yeah. That I remember.

JUDY: Oh, tell us something about that.

TOM: Well, all I remember about that was taking a street car and going out there and seeing [it]. And I remember, out there in the Presidio, well, you know, the.... It is still there. What do you call it? Crystal? [The 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition was an industrial and arts exhibition highlighting the recovery of the City from the 1906 earthquake and fire and celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal.]

JUDY: You mean the Fine Arts ...the existing building around the pond? [The Palace of Fine Arts] It is still there.

TOM: Yes. That I remember.



JUDY: That was at the far end of the Fair.

TOM: Is this Fusco here? [Again, looking at photos in the Sts. Peter and Paul Church book, page 122, print #117 as band director or page 115, print # 108 as basketball coach] Oh, yeah. Angelo Fusco. Yeah. I recognize him right away.

JUDY: Ok. Well, he was one of the Council Directors then. By the way Tom, do you have pictures of your mother and dad and you all when you were young?

TOM: No.

JUDY: Really. Because there was a wonderful photographer...

TOM: Oh. I have one. I have a picture taken by the photographer when he was right there on Filbert Street.

JUDY: Well, I was wondering if that was by J.B. Monaco? He was a very big photographer who took a lot of pictures. [An oral history by the Telegraph Hill Dwellers has been completed in 2006 of Richard Monaco, J.B. Monaco's grandson. Richard Dillon's book, "North Beach, The Italian Heart of San Francisco", with photographs by J.B. Monaco, was used at this point in the interview.]





TOM: Yeah. No. This one... I have a picture... No. Monaco was down around Broadway and in there. Monaco was. This is another one that I am talking about. But this Monaco was down around in the center there.

JUDY: Now, there are a couple of more pictures of his family there. Dante Monaco. And there is a picture of his shop [Photos between pages 77 and 78]. Go back a few more pages. But you remember another photographer.

TOM: Well, I remember Monaco, but there was another photographer on Filbert Street... [who was] very popular in those days.

JUDY: Here is Washington Square. Here is Tetrazzini, Luisa Tetrazzini [an Opera star, photo between pages 118 and 119]. That is why I asked about that. The Italian Theater, the Milano, across from Washington Square. Now would that have been where the Washington Theater now is?

TOM: Yes, that's it, where the Washington Theater now is.

JUDY: 1915 World's Fair. Stella, the nude.

TOM: Yes, I remember seeing that.



JUDY: Cliff House. Here! North Beach Café at Columbus and Chestnut and Taylor.  
Here is the Library – Italian.

TOM: No, that is way before my time.

JUDY: North Beach Books – Cavalli's! That is Cavalli's. Right? [She reads.] "Cavalli's Libreria Italiana at Columbus Avenue in 1903."

TOM: Cavalli. Cavalli. Cavalli on Stockton Street. [Cavalli Books has been in business over 100 years, selling Italian books, in North Beach.]

JUDY: The Buon Gusto Restaurant. The Toscano Hotel. Here is some...

TOM: What is this here...?

JUDY: This is the Cuneo Flats! Bay and Leavenworth! There they are!

TOM: Yep.

JUDY: Good for you. Dante Monaco and the gang. Here is the North Beach baseball team. Here are some of the leading citizens, Martinelli, Pallavelini, and Seragnoli and Mrs. Nina Monaco Biggs, the daughter of Louis Monaco, [who] taught English. Well, anyway, so you don't have a lot of photographs from those early days.







**Libreria Italiana**

TOM: No. No.

JUDY: OK. Some great shots of the ships. [Photos between pages 95 and 96] Oh, I did want to ask you. Do you remember when you were growing up seeing tall ships down at the waterfront like this? Three and four masted barques?

TOM: Yes. Some of those like that down there at Pier 39. Like around in there.

JUDY: Yeah. Like that?

TOM: Yeah. They come in as an example of it. Not that it was something that was taking away... [cargo].

JUDY: Oh, so they weren't still shipping.

TOM: No. No. It was mostly as a piece item.

JUDY: Yeah. Now, now here... These are some corners that are familiar to us anyway. Columbus and Jones, 1928 [still referring to photographs in the Dillon book, between pages 57 and 58]. But you remember trolleys, a lot of trolley cars then?

TOM: Yes. I remember the trolley cars. Yes.





JUDY: That one that crossed Columbus three times. Now here is Saint Peter's Episcopal Church [destroyed by the 1906 fire, at Stockton and Filbert] at left, where the Liguria... [Liguria Bakery stands at this site today].

TOM: Sts. Peter and Paul's...

JUDY: Yeah. Sts. Peter and Paul and it was completed in 1924, according to this book. And there is the Square there. Ah, now... there is the fire coming up the street. Well, I guess by the time you were...now this is Powell and Columbus opposite Washington Square, Trinity Cathedral of the Russian Orthodox [also destroyed by fire in 1906].

TOM: I was going to say...way before our time.

JUDY: Well, there are some great shots of Russian Hill, of Telegraph Hill. Well, do you think that North Beach has changed a lot in recent years or does it still have a certain similarity to your youth in some ways?

TOM: All is very quiet now. I mean no improvements or anything. Nothing different from the old days... that's all. So it is the same thing. It just seems like.

JUDY: It has a certain quality of a small community still to you?



TOM: Yeah. In other words, some people dying off and there is no continuance. And that's it. That is the way it looks to me. Just like we were talking about...where was it, Gloria [Deli]?

JUDY: Ah. Yeah. Nothing comes to take its place.

TOM: That was...Jesus. I always did shop there.

JUDY: Now here we have some of your friends. Tom Cara! [The Saints Peter and Paul Church book is shown again]

TOM: Yeah. I'm right in here. Right here.

JUDY: Oh, Tom. There you are... the Salesian Boy's Club 90-pound city championship team [page 113, print # 104]. You were a boxer?

TOM: No, this is basketball.

JUDY: Ah. Circa 1926.

TOM: Twenty-six. Yeah, this is De Martini. This is Scarpa. This is De Martini the other brother. They were twins.



JUDY: Oh, they were twins.

TOM: Yeah. This is me. This is De Martini. Let's see that's De Martini. Yeah.  
Then...the coach, ... Doctor Zanino. Reverend Zanino, Priest. Cara, me.

JUDY: Oh, for heaven sakes. Oh, that's wonderful.

TOM: What is that? Just a minute. I remember that marriage...[page 166-167, print #148].

JUDY: Joe DiMaggio's first marriage? [Joe married actress Dorothy Arnold, November 1939, at Saints Peter and Paul Church. 20,000 fans mobbed the North Beach neighborhood to get a glimpse.]

TOM: And this?

JUDY: 1939. That is Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia visiting San Francisco in 1939 [New York's Mayor, page 169, print #150].

TOM: I remember that. When he came...



JUDY: [Reading the caption from Saints Peter and Paul Church book about the Fiorello photo] "He was a popular figure in North Beach's Italian quarters shown here with Chef Janella and Mayor [Angelo J.] Rossi." [Christopher Cara was told by his parents, when they once passed a classic Victorian house on the north side of Union Street between Pierce and Scott, that it once belonged to Mayor Rossi, who they said was "part of my mother's family."]

TOM: There is Rafetto there [photo on same page, 169, print # 149 of bocce game].

JUDY: There's Rafetto. William Rafetto. As in the Rafetto Real Estate Company?

TOM: Yeah, that's the father. Yeah.

JUDY: Ah hah. Playing Bocce Ball at the Old Tivoli Restaurant on Grant.

TOM: And this is...[same photo].

JUDY: Silvester Andriano?

TOM: Andriano. Yeah. Yeah. Very popular man.

JUDY: And "Anchovies A La Cara"? [opposite page on 168, reference in text to the Salesian Old Timers Association 1939 reunion at the Lucca Restaurant with gourmet





dishes named after “zany personalities of well-liked individuals of the Club”]. What was that about? That must have been on a menu. Tom, you prepared those anchovies for some event?

TOM: Most likely.

JUDY: Now who do we have here? Here is Tom Cara, [She reads caption on page 114, print 107], “Quarterly Communion of the Salesian Boy’s Club, 1927, with Father Oreste Trinchieri and Angelo Fusco.”

TOM: Right there.

JUDY: Look at you. Your hair was parted in the middle.

TOM: Heh. Heh. No, it was on the side but I was so fuzzy. That’s what they called me, the kid fuzzy.

JUDY: Fuzzy. You had fuzzy black hair.

TOM: I had so much hair. Yeah.

JUDY: Really. Oh, that’s wonderful Tom. There you are. So in 1927 you would have been seventeen years old.



TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: Was your team pretty good? Your basketball team?

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: Oh, I see. Here is your hair... kind of curls over your front there a little bit.

Oh, you were a handsome little devil. Nonna. Here's ...?

TOM: Nonna.

JUDY: [She reads from book] "Nonna Valvano was born in this alley prior to the earthquake and fire, 1906." Now who is that? One of your grandmothers?

TOM: Let's see what it says here. Nonna Valvano. That was my wife's mother. It's an "a" there.

JUDY: Ah. Marys' mother.

TOM: [He reads] "Born in this alley prior to the earthquake and fire, 1906."



JUDY: And this is a picture on Stockton, between Vallejo and Green. So she was born in the alley off one of those there in North Beach. So Mary's mother was born here in San Francisco.

TOM: Yes, she was born here in San Francisco. [Cara mentioned in the first interview that his wife's family came to California in 1855, the Gold Rush days, by ship around the horn. The interviewer said he believed that his grandchildren were seventh-generation Californians through his wife's line.]

JUDY: Oh, my word.

TOM: Oh, here she is. Oh, God, that's what you call Ferrari. Isn't it?

JUDY: Yes! Carri Ferrari Bacigalupi [photo in Sts. Peter and Paul Church book page 103, print # 93].

TOM: Bacigalupi (Pronouncing it for her).

JUDY: The Columbus Day Queen of 1926.

TOM: Yeah. I remember her.



JUDY: Look at that wonderful outfit! [Laughter] The Columbus Day Parade still survives.

TOM: Yes.

JUDY: So you remember that, I guess, in your youth. OK. Now what's this about a bombing in March, 1927. A fifth bombing?

TOM: Oh yeah. When they used to bomb the god damn place...

JUDY: What was that about Tom?

TOM: Well, I don't know. Some nut. Used to bomb this church.

JUDY: [She reads.] "Bombing attempts at church, 1927," [pages 98-102, Saints Peter and Paul Church book]

TOM: Yeah, that's it.

JUDY: Oh, my God. They had a bombing at Sts. Peter and Paul.

TOM: Yes. Yes.





JUDY: [Reading.] March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1927. They had a detective waiting in the priest's house with a shot gun and a telephone connected to the officers.

TOM: Here is De Mattei. He was a great...great police officer. [Richard Monaco refers to him as a big hero in his THD oral history on page 32.]

JUDY: He was a detective, Sergeant Louis De Mattei. Good Heavens! So it was a terrorist kind of thing. Oh, now here. [She reads] "Umberto Cara, (Tom's father) seated in front of the teacher at Americanization class," 1916 [page 49, print 42]. Your dad!

TOM: Yeah. He is in here someplace.

JUDY: I'll be...yes. [She reads] "A member of the class was Umberto Cara..." That was your father's name, Umberto..."shown seated directly in front of the teacher."

TOM: There he is right here.

JUDY: Oh, my.

TOM: See that big mustache on him.

JUDY: Wonderful mustache. And it is the Americanization class....



TOM: Downstairs. That was downstairs where they ...with the priest.

JUDY: At Sts. Peter and Paul. What was your mother's name?

TOM: Felichita.

JUDY: Felichita. Was that "happy"?

TOM: Yeah. Felice.

JUDY: Ah ha. You were altar boys in 1915? You had only been five then.

TOM: Heh. Heh.

JUDY: What year do you become an altar boy? After your communion?

TOM: Eight. Eight years. When you were eight years old then you can become an altar boy.

JUDY: Now this is the year you were born. [She reads page 46, print # 38] "Students are photographed amongst the ruins of the convent grounds....before the 1906









**Thomas Cara**

**Charles Cara**

**The large photograph to the left is captioned on the reverse:**

**"Property of Tom Cara an Altar Boy – pictured in front row as an Altar Boy."**

**"Taken in 1920 in the Side Yard of the church before the top part of the church was built – see wooden steeple that held the church bell."**

**"Girl in front is Musso girl."**





earthquake and fire [it] was a beautiful garden. In 1910, this site became the North Beach Playground." Oh, that is right down the street then. It was a convent.

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: The playground had been a convent. But you only knew it as a playground.  
[The playground has recently been renamed Joe DiMaggio Playground.]

TOM: Yeah. There is the old church [page 45, print #37, showing church after the 1906 earthquake and fire].

JUDY: And there is the church you remember. Huh?

TOM: Yeah.

JUDY: [She reads.] "Following the earthquake and fire... Filbert and Dupont..." Oh, well, that is beautiful. So they built it quite quickly after the fire, didn't they?

TOM: Hum hum. Well, this is somebody we know.

JUDY: Edith Fantozi Baccari [a baby picture, page 41, print # 35].

TOM: Yeah. Baccari. Yeah.



JUDY: 1905. Is that, what's his name, Baccari's mother? Must be Baccari's mother?  
[Alessandro Baccari, founder of the North Beach Museum and the author of, "San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf"] Huh?

TOM: Yeah [Alessandro Baccari confirmed that the photo was of his mother].

JUDY: Well, this is a wonderful history of North Beach too. Well, it is a little community, isn't it?

TOM: Heh. Heh. Heh. Yeah. All right now, I am going to go.

JUDY: That concludes interviews on two occasions with Thomas Cara by Judith Robinson. [Volunteers from the Telegraph Hill Dwellers transcribed and edited the recorded tapes in 2005-6, which are held by the Bancroft Library.]







Examiner photos by Bob Jones

**SURROUNDED** by an impressive display of copper pots and pans, Tom Cara fills a polenta ring with Chicken Cacciatore.

Albert Morch

# The Cara Recipe for A Good Life

THOMAS CARA shunned the post-World War I "rat race to make a mil" in favor of the "house race to happiness."

Cara, 63, who opened the cookware shop bearing his name in 1947, graduated in philosophy and economics from St. Mary's College in 1933. His educational background and natural bent led him to turn down a job with the CIA, which would have meant a peacetime extension of the excitement he experienced as an Army G-2 agent.

"Oh, I thought about it," said the white haired, blue eyed merchant over a pear flavored brandy he concocts himself. "But after four years in the service, I wanted to set my roots down even deeper in San Francisco with my family."

"When it was all said and done I decided I wanted to create a business fitted to me and my family's personal appreciation of life. You know, open at 11 a.m., close at five with two bouts for lunch. And it's worked out pretty much that way."

During the war, Cara, a San Francisco native, who speaks Italian, French and Spanish, was a G-2 captain in captured documents and industrial intelligence. The high point, he said, was analyzing the contents of the briefcase Benito Mussolini was trying to escape with to Switzerland when he was killed.

"It was exciting stuff, but I can't tell you about it because a strict classified."

CARA WAS BORN on the west side of Telegraph Hill and has seen North Beach undergo many changes. His father, Umberto, was a cement contractor who retired at 40 after helping rebuild many structures destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.

"I've seen Broadway go from nice family restaurants to jazz joints to topless. It's sad, but maybe the next step is a return to family establishments where people can escape from the doldrums of repetitious living."



Thomas Cara

"When I get older, I won't retire and grope about, but I will go to Enrico's from 12 to 3 every day for coffee. Banducci has the only place on the street anything like the old days, where a man can sit and think. He's had a struggle to do so and should be given every honor possible."

Although he reminisces a bit from time to time, Tom says the only way to stay young is to "no be nostalgic and live for the coming Sunday."

CARA GRADUATED from college during the Depression, waited the streets for six months seeking employment, and "was happy as hell" to find a job with a bar supply house for \$60 a month. Before going into the Army he worked for Petri wine as a sales promotion manager, but got into the gourmet cookware business as a result of the connections he made in Europe while in the Army.

Married since 1943 to the former Mary Valvano, whose grandfather prospected for gold at Volcano in 1855, the couple has two sons. Christopher is an actor with the Marin Shakespeare Festival and John, who recently gave up teaching at high school to enter the supermarket business because "he could no longer cope with parent-inspired permissiveness."

"I'm content to sit on the aisle and watch. I guess that's what philosophers are supposed to do. But I do sense that the family unit is being reborn and with that will come the return of family guidance and discipline."

A visit to his shop often results in more quotations by Cara from the likes of Aquinas and Plato than attention to pots and pans. Among his favorites are Italian proverbs. One he likes even to stress the need for individuality — which San Francisco has more of than any other place — is, "He who dresses in green, after everyone else is wearing green is always given to praise himself."





## In Memoriam - Mary Cara

If one word characterized Mary Cara, it was generous. She always had time to talk to children, inquiring about their day's activities or to greet a fellow dog owner on her daily walk with her own dog. Mary loved animals and people, and they loved her.

A native of Stockton, Mary and her husband, Tom Cara, opened Thomas Cara, Ltd., a culinary shop on Columbus Avenue, after World War II. The shop is now on Pacific Avenue, and specializes in espresso machines. The Caras were one of the early advertisers in The Semaphore.

Few Telegraph Hill Dwellers have given so much time and energy to the organization. Mary served the Dwellers as: Vice President, Treasurer, Financial Secretary, and Director. She was a hostess for social events that welcomed new members and helped make them feel a part of THD.

Mary also spent time as a docent at the Presidio Army Museum, an interest she developed through Tom's army career.

Through her son Christopher's participation in the American Conservatory Theatre, Mary became one of ACT's strongest supporters and fund raisers.

Mary Cara was a multi-faceted person with ties to diverse constituencies in San Francisco. The Dwellers and her neighbors were lucky to have known her.

# NORTH BEACH ESPRESSO: A STORY OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

By Kathleen Cannon

No respectable North Beach establishment would consider life without an espresso machine. Just ask around. From Cafés Trieste, Divine, Roma, Greco, Puccini, and Mario's, to North Beach Restaurant, Moose's, Enrico's, and Tosca. All of North Beach invests in the commercial espresso machine...it is the heart of the business.

Making an espresso used to be a production. Steam poured out from the spouts. Heaven help you if it ran dry. After loading, a large handle was pulled delivering a light, frothy brown liquid into a tiny cup. In today's faster, more electronic world, buttons are pushed, also delivering a decent cuppa. But there still exists in North Beach the legendary machines that eloquently speak of a century of espresso evolution. Adorned with ornaments, huge and ungainly but beautiful, this is their story, and also the tale of their more efficient replacements.



Christopher Cara at Thomas Cara, Ltd



Café Trieste

Though Thomas Cara, the godfather of North Beach espresso, has passed on, his son, Christopher Cara, now runs the business assisted by Carlotta his well-mannered Dalmatian out of a Barbary Coast building (a former carhouse complete with sign "Jesopstairs") on Pacific Avenue. The location is a virtual museum, displaying the oldest espresso maker in N.Beach, #193 La Pavoni from Milano...which proudly sits next to another 3 foot (unnamed) copper beauty used in Christopher's family home in the 1950s. "Unnamed" has a twin in the window of Francis Ford Coppola's Columbus Avenue cafe.

Thomas Cara, Ltd. also houses "the secret recipe" for espresso which Christopher's dad obtained from some Neapolitan during WWII. And it remains a secret.

At Café Trieste, the enclave, where Coppola and others have retreated to write, Ida deftly plays two espresso machines—the modern, fully automatic Magister and, a La San Marco, a semi automatic "from the 1950's, or later." She pushes the buttons on one, pulls handles on the other. With so many journal writers seeking caffeine-filled inspiration there is little down time.

Tosca. Allegedly, the oldest functioning



Café Zoetrope

espresso machine resides at the Tosca. Jammed nightly and purportedly a stop for the Mayor's party posse, the watering hole features, at the end of the bar, an Emelio from 1919 (the same year as the bar



Tosca's

was opened). The machine still provides steam to warm the popular Irish coffees. At the window end of the bar, a 1927 Victoria Arduini regally holds court.

At Coppola's Café Zoetrope, a unique espresso maker discovery: a Bosco from Naples given to Francis by Dr. Illy (as in Illy Coffee) 12 years ago when Coppola started the restaurant. Cups also were designed by Dr. Illy. And this espresso machine sports two real handles—no buttons, electric or otherwise. As a handle is pulled, steam pours from the machine. Gracing the window is the historic Argentinean canister (twin to Thom. Cara's) from the Zoetrope Studio days, a retired Godfather.

Café Divine. Although he doesn't look it, David Wright has owned espresso machines for over 25 years. After several La San Marcos and Rancillios, he has settled on Elektra. It is top of the line—a



Prozza Pellegrini still uses the Faema.

## NORTH BEACH ESPRESSO

Belle Époque, around \$15,000 of machine retail. It will not go 0 to 60 in less than 8 seconds, but it has become the restaurant industry standard because it integrates the popular retro 1960's facade (a shiny ornate canister with Eagle atop)—with electrical components and reliability. It is a piece of art, a beautiful instrument and David is a master.

David recalls the steam/handle pulling days, and the repair and disabled machines that "ran dry and burned themselves up or constantly broke down." He points out the 5 electrical "buttons." He merely pushes one or two. No handle. Repair is occasionally necessary, but doesn't seem to be an impending threat.

At Piazza Pellegrini, explains owner Dario, the Faema, an older, large ornate canister with an eagle on top, wings spread, also is a "manual" machine.

And the eagle's wings spread over \$7500 worth of grand machine. No electric universal emblems. But no handles either. Instead there are two prominent buttons which when depressed cause an audible mechanical sound. The sound, the look, the taste are all wonderfully real.

A quick zig zag down Stockton to Columbus. Most if not all of the espresso machines are work-horses, modern looking chrome boxes with electrical elements—Elektras and a few other brands.

Is there no where in North Beach where espresso making is still a production? In a word, No." But if you need drama you can always stop by Café Puccini, drop a few coins in the juke box—which is considerably harder to operate than the sleek Electra behind the counter—listen to a Tosca airia and smell the coffee! ♦



David Wright at Café Divine



## Photographic Credits

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Following Page 35, Cuneo Flats, Courtesy of Richard Monaco, Photographer: J.B. Monaco

Following Page 58, Melvin "Bob" Figoni and Tom Cara in Figonis Hardware Store, Issue #99, Telegraph Hill Semaphore, June, 1987, page 16; Courtesy of June Osterberg

Following Page 66, Columbus Ave. Streetcars, Courtesy of Richard Monaco, Photographer: J.B. Monaco

Following Page 91, Cara Shop, Courtesy of Christopher Cara, Photographer: Jerry DiVecchio

Following Page 107, Milano Theater, Courtesy of Richard Monaco, Photographer: J.B. Monaco

Following Page 117, Liberia Italiana, Courtesy of Richard Monaco, Photographer: J.B. Monaco

Following Page 128, Altar Boy at Sts. Peter and Paul Church, Courtesy of Christopher Cara

Following Page 130, Cara Cooking - "The Cara and Feeding of Cooks", San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle, February 15, 1976, THD Archives

Following Page 130, "Cara Recipe for Good Life", S.F. Sunday Chronicle, article by Albert Morch, 1973, THD Archives

Following Page 130, In Memoriam - Mary Cara, 1987, THD Archives

Following Page 130, "North Beach Espresso", THD Semaphore Issue # 176, Summer, 2006, THD Archives





